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Research paper

How marketers argue for business – Exploring the rhetorical nature of industrial marketing work

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ABSTRACT

This paper takes a rhetorical approach to the study of everyday marketing work. It seeks to understand how marketers make sense of the work they do, what discourse is used, and with what rhetorical effect. The study is based on interviews, observations and daily interaction with five marketers involved in marketing and selling of consulting services. It was found that these marketers draw on relationship discourse and customer need discourse – among others – when arguing for business. These discourses could be understood as contradictory discursive forces used by marketers to talk up suitable rhetorical selves, by means of which they accomplish their work. As a whole, this paper provides an illustration of the rhetorical nature of marketing, and discuss theoretical implications, aiming to expand the intellectual agenda for future studies of marketing work that takes marketers' use of language seriously.

1. Introduction

There is a growing interest in work-based studies that recognizes the constitutive role of language (Barley & Kunda, 2001; Korica, Nicolini, & Johnson, 2015; Okhuysen et al., 2015). The underlying assumption is that language is not primarily used by people to make more or less precise representations of the reality of a situation. Language does not mirror reality, it *constructs* it (Potter, 1996). Put differently, words create, or *perform*, the acts they refer to (Austin, 1975), with profound implications for how organizational life should and could be studied. By problematizing the representation of everyday work – and investigate how discourse is used on a micro-level by various organizational actors to accomplish things – we are able to learn not only about the discursive means used, but also how the social life of an organization is produced and reproduced (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000a, 2000b).

This is particular important in the field of marketing where conventional marketing management discourse prescribes certain activities as “correct” and “natural”, whereas every other activity a marketing manager might be involved in does not fall in the category of marketing at all (Hackley, 2003). Thus, having marketing managers account for their accomplishments in terms of conventional marketing management discourse might not be very informative of their everyday activities, leading to one-dimensional understanding of the marketing subjects and the nature of their work (Brownlie & Saren, 1997). On the other hand, paying close attention to how, where and when marketers talk at work we are able to account for the diversity and complexity of their work-life and how they navigate discursively in a world full of competing views and alternative interpretations (Ardley & Quinn, 2014; Svensson, 2006, 2007). In so doing we will also learn more about the subject of marketing – the marketer – whom has been given poor attention both in research and marketing textbooks (Ardley, 2005; Woodall, 2012).

In the context of industrial marketing we have seen micro-level discourse analyses in areas such as *inter-organizational relationships and networks* (Alajoutsijärvi, Eriksson, & Tikkanen, 2001; Araujo & Easton, 2012; Ellis & Hopkinson, 2010; Ellis, Rod, Beal, & Lindsay, 2012; Makkonen, Aarikka-Stenroos, & Olkkonen, 2012), *work in advertising agencies* (Hackley, 2000; Svensson, 2007), *B2B selling* (Dean, Ellis, & Wells, 2017), *“productization” in professional service firms* (Jaakkola, 2011), and *communicating on industrial companies' Web sites* (Jalkala & Salminen, 2009). These studies have provided detailed illustrations of how ambiguous marketing practices are legitimized, power relations established, professional identities constructed and social structures maintained by means of discourse in industrial marketing settings. Notably, the studies above seek to demonstrate how marketing discourse (re)produces organizational realities, *as any other discourse found in organizational settings does*. Miles (2018) argues that marketing research by means of discourse analysis seldom has something to say about the potentially unique qualities of this particular discourse. Discourse-oriented studies of marketing will be unfortunately silent on the *rhetorical nature of marketing* (Miles, 2018).

Taking a *rhetorical approach* to the nature of industrial marketing

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work, as this paper does, locates the *argumentative aspects* of discourse in the foreground. More precisely, a rhetorical analysis draws attention to contradiction and disagreement – the centrifugal forces of discourse – to understand how certain ideas of the world, but not others, are made persuasive (Billig, 1996). In this paper it assumed that meaning – for others, and for ourselves – is created through argument and persuasion (Symon, 2000). From this follows that informing, listening and answering are not *other* communication practices found in marketing, *besides persuasion*, as argued by Duncan and Moriarty (1998), and later applied by Houman Andersen (2001) when studying how marketing managers should design rhetorical strategies in marketing communication.

The rhetorical dimension of marketing discourse has been widely acknowledged (Ardley, 2006; Ardley & Quinn, 2014; Brown, 2005; Brownlie & Saren, 1997; Hackley, 2003; Skålén & Hackley, 2011), although without drawing on the ancient rhetorical tradition, or presenting any conceptual connection *between* marketing and rhetoric. The first to do such a connection, in modern times we should add, are Laufer and Paradeise (1990). They argue that "marketing is the bureaucratic form of Sophism", and point to the many similarities between the sophists – the teachers of persuasion who came to Athens for business reasons in the fifth century BCE – and contemporary marketers. When marketers and sophists do their work, they use all empirical means available with the ultimate objective of winning the audience's approval; they are experts in the use of everyday language, proverbs and cultural stereotypes; and hold efficiency as the only criterion possible for the work they do (Laufer & Paradeise, 1990, pp. 7–8). However, as commented by Miles (2018), Laufer & Paradeise make an important contribution to the understanding of the rhetorical nature of marketing, but they never take it further than pointing out similarities between marketing and rhetoric.

A more progressive discussion of marketing and (sophistic) rhetoric can be found in Tonks (2002), and to some extent in Nilsson (2006). Tonks covers a broad range of scholarship on marketing, and the philosophical roots of rhetoric, to argue "marketing rhetoric is [—] an instrumental device for the everyday reality of marketing managers or for anyone who practices marketing, [which] lead to the more radical claim that marketing *is* a reincarnation of rhetoric" (Tonks, 2002, p. 816). Nilsson (2006) builds on Tonks (2002) and Laufer and Paradeise (1990) in an attempt to illustrate how specific rhetorical devices might be useful in various situations in marketing.

The most extensive and ambitious conceptual discussion on the relationship between marketing and rhetoric can be found in Miles (2018). He acknowledges the understanding of sophistic marketing brought forward by Tonks (2002) and Laufer and Paradeise (1990), and then work up a book-length argument that marketing "in all its manifestation, can be seen to be a rhetorical discipline – one concerned with the persuasive control of the flow of people and resources, and most of all, attention" (2018, p. 130).

So far conceptual treatises on the rhetorical nature of marketing, which are remarkable few compared to the multitude of rhetorically informed research on managerial work and other management practices in general (Brown, Ainsworth, & Grant, 2012; Cheney, Christensen, Conrad, & Lair, 2004; Flory & Iglesias, 2010; Green, 2004; Hartelius & Browning, 2008; Jarzabkowski & Sillince, 2007; Nilsson, 2010; Symon, 2000; Watson, 1995).

Considering empirical studies of industrial marketing, where rhetorical theory is used, there are even fewer studies to be found. von Koskull and Fougère (2011) have identified and analysed customer-related arguments in a service development process to learn what drives this development process forward. They found that "customer orientation" is used rhetorically to express identification in a development team, but this form of argumentation does not result in action as conventional normative marketing literature would suggest (von Koskull & Fougère, 2011). Empirical marketing studies that make use of rhetorical theory is totally dominated by studies of style and rhetorical figures in marketing communication and advertising (Huhmann, Mothersbaugh, & Franke, 2002; Marsh, 2007; McQuarrie & Mick, 1993, 1996; Persuit, 2013; Phillips & McQuarrie, 2002; Scott, 1994). Subsequently, we know little of the rhetorical nature of everyday industrial marketing work. This is the research gap this paper seeks to overcome.

Similar to von Koskull and Fougère (2011) I draw on ethnographic methods to study argumentation in professional service firms. However, they analyse single arguments in a pre-determined empirical context, whereas I have chosen to study how marketers argue for business purposes in a wide range of situations, seeking to analyse how they engage in the "centrifugal forces of discourse" (Billig, 1996). The specific research question to answer is, *how do marketers argue to make sense of themselves and their work*?

At the heart of the study are five business professionals involved in marketing and sales of consulting services. These professionals are here understood as a type of "managerial rhetoricians", which suggests that they deal with controversies much like a classical orator who analyses the specific audience, considers available rhetorical resources, and enacts expedient rhetorical strategies to accomplish his or her organizational duties (Hartelius & Browning, 2008).

This paper aims to make the following contributions. To recent discourse-oriented research on industrial marketing (Alajoutsijärvi et al., 2001; Ardley & Quinn, 2014; Dean et al., 2017; Kaski, Niemi, & Pullins, 2017; Loacker & Sullivan, 2016; Lowe, Purchase, & Ellis, 2012; Schepis, Purchase, & Ellis, 2014), it demonstrates the significance of the argumentative context when analysing how and why marketers talk as they do, leading to an expanded theoretical agenda for research on marketing discourses.

This analysis of marketers' arguing for business also explores the rhetorical nature of their work. In so doing it both answers the overall call for work-based studies of managerial practices (Barley & Kunda, 2001; Korica et al., 2015; Okhuysen et al., 2015), and contribute a rhetorical turn of marketing, following the turn to rhetoric seen in management and organization studies (Bonet & Sauquet, 2010; Hartelius & Browning, 2008; Sillince, 2002; Sillince & Suddaby, 2008; Watson, 1995), and in the human sciences at large (Simons, 1989, 1990).

2. A rhetorical theory sensitive to controversial marketing discourse

Ardley and Quinn argue that marketing activities are accomplished by "diverse breadth of language, diverse ways of enacting tasks and accomplishing goals, set within increasingly diverse contexts", and we should not underestimate the "importance and significance of individual local practices that construct the everyday organizing activities of marketers" (Ardley & Quinn, 2014, p. 112). These claims by Ardley and Quinn echo the empirically well-grounded portrayal of heterogenous marketing work full of ambiguities and uncertainties (Lien, 1997; Prus, 1989a, 1989b), which is poorly represented in conventional marketing management discourse (Brownlie & Saren, 1997; Hackley, 2003). Subsequently, to make sense of everyday industrial marketing work we need to go beyond conventional marketing discourse, without necessarily denying the significance of it.

My understanding of" discourse" draws on Alvesson & Kärreman, and can be formulated in terms of "the study of talk and written text in its social action context" (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000b, p. 1126). Assuming that discourse is" manufactured" by" pre-existing linguistic resources", invites the discourse analyst to investigate both the structure of the resources and the selection of different *discursive repertoires* (Potter, Wetherell, Gill, & Edwards, 1990, p. 207). The repertoires of marketing discourse – understood as "more or less specific ways to talk and write about the work of marketing" – are the linguistic resources "by means of which marketing work is made talkable and writeable as well as listenable and readable" (Svensson, 2006, p. 352). Based on a micro-discourse analysis of a meeting between a marketing consultancy firm and potential client, Svensson found three repertoires used by the marketers to frame and conceptualize their work. The “repertoire of control and pro-activity” stresses the managerial aspects, the “repertoire of responsivity” stresses the given external forces that marketers respond to, and the “science repertoire” stresses the analytical and rational aspects it takes to do marketing work (Svensson, 2006). In a similar discourse-based study, Ellis and Hopkinson (2010) found that marketing and purchasing managers in industrial contexts use seven repertoires – presence, visual contact, monologue, dialogue, reported speech, dismissive reported speech, words versus action – to construct their “theories of communication”. Finally, in a study of strategizing within business networks, Schepis et al. (2014) found that the following repertoires were used to construct organizations identities; alternative network, network theory (or logic), obligatory relationships, exchange relationships, indigeneity as competitive strategy, claims of connection and claims of distance.

Typical for this type of discourse-oriented studies is that the marketers of interest are approached as “users of discourse” rather than as rhetorical subjects engaged in argumentation. Since it is difficult to account for the argumentative dimension of everyday human interaction by means of discourse (or conversational) analysis (Billig, 1996) such studies will be unfortunately silent on the highly dynamic controversies *in*, and *through*, the marketing subjects accomplish their work.

The rhetorical approach to marketers' argumentation favoured in this paper emphasises the instability of positions taken by people in verbal interaction. As von Koskull and Fougère (2011) comments, when trying to persuade others, marketers themselves are targets for others' persuasive activities, and could thus be persuaded to change their own views. Rhetorically speaking, people are “moving targets” because their knowledge about persuasion attempts changes based on experience (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Based on a study of attitude formation, Billig (1989) found “holding strong views” it is not as simple as taking an argumentative position and one-sidedly argue for the superiority of that position. There are a great variation in the discourse that expresses a particular view because the person holding strong views constantly reacts to his or her *own arguments*, leading to the conclusion that “holdings views” is a form of argumentative process that never ends (Billig, 1989).

This understanding of argumentation acknowledges the significance of *contradiction*, which originates with Protagoras [c. 490 – c. 400 BCE]. Protagoras was one of the most influential *sophists* whom came to Athens for business reasons in the fifth century BCE. The sophists' clients were wealthy Athenian farmers, shopkeepers, merchants and other members of the middle class in need of persuasive skills when speaking on political, ceremonial and forensic matters. Although the sophists were surprisingly few, their importance for the origin of the rhetorical tradition cannot be overestimated (Herrick, 2005).

The method for argumentation taught by Protagoras was *antilogic* – examining arguments on both sides of an issue – assuming that every reasonable argument can be met with an equally reasonable *counter*-argument (Guthrie, 1971). In this respect, “having an argument” does not indicate interaction marked by hostility and bad temper. Loss of temper is typically an indication of argumentation breakdown, which is a reason why conversations end (Billig, 1996).

Argumentation entails conversations in the “spirit of contradiction” in which there can be no last word because “claim and counter-claim can be made indefinitely” (Billig, 1996:123). It motivates a close investigation of the argumentative context rather than the individual arguments used in a disagreement. The context is not a solid structure that determines the interaction, as suggested by Bitzer (1968). On the contrary, “selves, situations, and meanings are all matters of negotiation” (Willard, 1989, p. 271). When “making an argument” we also make the rhetorical subject who then “becomes a force in the emerging discourse” (Hawhee, 2002, p. 17). This perspective denies the rhetorical subjects an essence beyond the persuasive processes. The “authentic personality” of such a rhetorical subject is one that is *impersonated* in a particular situation: “the wider his range of impersonations, the fuller his self” (Lanham, 1976, p. 27).

In conclusion, to understand the meaning and effect of a piece of discourse, the analyst needs to consider both the outspoken argument brought forward by the subject, and the unspoken positions in the argumentative context that are being criticized or justified. This is by no means a straightforward analytic procedure because diverse arguments interact with each other, with the overall argumentative context, with the conclusion they suggest, and with the very discourse used to portray the arguments (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1971).

Moreover, this paper draws on a humanistic rhetorical tradition that acknowledges the human being as the origin of speech rather than a location from which discourse is articulated (Fish, 1989; Lanham, 1976; Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1971; Vatz, 1973). Then again, what we experience as reality is not the result of a single actor's doings and considerations. Meaning and reality (with a small r) is the outcome of an *intersubjective* rhetorical process (Brummett, 1976), marked by many-sided argument and controversy (Billig, 1996). Furthermore, how and with what effect people use their persuasive resources (*rhetorica utens*) is possible and meaningful to study regardless of whether these people recognize themselves as rhetoricians or not. This is an important note given that business professionals often are reluctant to talk about their work in rhetorical terms (Nilsson, 2010). In so concluding I turn to the empirical matters of this study.

3. Method

3.1. Research approach and fieldwork

The study presented in this paper is based on an ethnographic research approach, which suggest a direct and personal contact with the field, and a theoretically informed interpretation of field material to learn more about social organization and culture (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). “Being there”, where marketing happens, enables a rich description of various marketing phenomena (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). In my case, the fieldwork lasted from 2009 to 2012. During this period, empirical material was generated from observations, semi-formal interviews and from everyday conversations with ten professionals with explicit responsibility to “do business” by means of marketing and sales activities, in a business-to-business context. Five of these professionals were involved in marketing and sales of consultancy services in knowledge-intensive service firms. It is these five professionals and their work that the analysis in this paper is based on. They and their organizations have been given fictive names to protect their anonymity.

From TERRA Consulting Sweden: Carl, Axel, Anders.
From NOVO Consulting: Lars and Linus.

TERRA plans, constructs and manages engineering solutions to a wide range of industries all over the world. TERRA Sweden consist of about 50 offices and some 3.000 employees. NOVO is a consultancy company specialized in the area of operational management, with about 150 consultants, active mostly in Europe and Asia.

At the time of the fieldwork “Carl” was responsible for marketing at one of the regional offices. His educational background was in engineering. I had known Carl professionally for over ten years. We then had a sort of semi-professional friendship, difficult to define. We met as friends once or twice every year. We usually started to chat about our private lives, but before long we engaged in animated conversations about the nature of marketing and selling. We seldom agreed. This was the main reason why Carl was asked to participate in the study. I knew he would be willing to share his ideas and experiences “in the spirit of contradiction”.

Carl had a colleague, “Anders”, who had a similar role and background as Carl but worked in different geographical areas. They were both deeply involved in the coordination of marketing activities and in sales coaching. Carl often referred to discussions he had with Anders concerning how poorly managed marketing and sales were at TERRA. I became curious about these discussions so I asked Carl to help me involve Anders in my research, which he did. Carl also introduced me to "Axel", who had very limited experience of marketing and sales. At the time he had recently been appointed sales coordinator and sales coach at TERRA.

"Lars" was a Senior Sales and Marketing Manager at NOVO and have had a long career in business. He was about to retire when I was introduced to him by a person I knew at NOVO. The same person also introduced me to "Linus". Linus is the youngest of the professionals in this study. He had recently graduated from university with a degree in management. His role at NOVO was rather vague, he told me. Officially a management consultant, but in practice dealing with various short-term marketing activities.

None of the five marketers were connected to a marketing department, nor did they have an academic background in marketing. I choose them because "non-professional" marketers often are excluded from studies of marketing work (Hackley, Skålén, & Stenfors, 2009; Hagberg & Kjellberg, 2010).

My interaction with Carl, Anders, Axel, Lars and Linus could be characterised as "co-operative inquiries" (Reason, 1988) and "active interviewing" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995), in which they participated as empirical sources *and* as active partners in a critical process of interpretation. In more practical terms, they asked as many questions as I did, and we constantly argued about what was said and why. This happened both when I approached them to do formal interviews (with a clearly stated purpose), and when spending time observing them. By the end of the day it is difficult to tell the difference between interviews and everyday conversations, other than interviews were pre-arranged. The talk itself had the same argumentative character.

About the empirical material, the rhetorical analysis presented in this paper is based on eight open-ended interviews, five observations of sales meetings and sales coaching events and two workshops at TERRA where I was invited by Carl and Anders to present and discuss my research with a number of TERRA consultants. The observations were conducted without a detailed observational scheme. Notes were taken swiftly and discreetly when something significant happened. Occasionally I got permission to audio record conversations and meetings, for recall purposes, given that this did not interfere with the conversations or meetings. The recordings were later transcribed and stored in TAMSAnalyzer (an open-source software designed for qualitative analysis) along with the handwritten notes.

3.2. *The analytic process*

The analysis of data when doing ethnography is not a well-defined part of research that comes after fieldwork and before writing the result up (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Analytic thinking is present already when formulating the research problem, and continues through the fieldwork and the writing. Typically, it's an iterative process which slowly articulates and expands the analysis through "systematic combining [—] where theoretical framework, empirical fieldwork, and case analysis evolve simultaneously [—] particularly useful for development of new theories" (Dubois & Gadde, 2002, p. 554).

The procedure for analysing the empirical material followed the idea of "grounded theorizing" presented by Hammersley and Atkinson (2007). Initially I did close and repeated readings of the material, aiming to code and organize words, sentences and anecdotes that seemed to say something significant about how marketing work is accomplished in a rhetorical perspective. In so doing a number of analytic categories began to emerge. Some of these came directly from the talk of professionals in my study, as *relationship selling* and *customer need*, but most of them were categories invented by me, as *competence*, *cooperation*, *talk about co-workers*, *professional as researcher, emotional work* and *working through others*.

At this stage of the analysis I had a rather broad rhetorical perspective, searching the material for answers to the questions *where, when and how do professionals argue for business*? As remarked by Hammersley and Atkinson (2007), data is here used to "think with", rather than being brought together in an explicit analytic model. The organization and interpretation of the analytic categories guided me theoretically to rhetorical concepts as *ethos*, *rhetorical situation*, *impersonation*, *kairos* and *copia*, which in turn motivated an integration of some of the first categories, which in turn gave more nuanced answers to my analytic questions. In so doing, a rudimentary theory of "arguing for business" emerged – clearly informed by a sophistic understanding of rhetoric – and with focus on how marketers argue to make sense of themselves and their work.

Altogether this analytic process resembles the "constant comparative method" of how "raw" data is abstracted into theory; comparing incidents applicable to each category, integrating categories, delimiting the theory, and writing (theory) up (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, pp. 101–115). However, Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) are careful to comment, with reference to Glaser & Strauss, this form of grounded theorizing should be understood as a perspective on analysis rather than a detailed technical procedure.

Finally, a comment on the author of this paper, "the one doing the ethnography". I have worked in the field of marketing for over 25 years, and have had titles such as Communication Consultant, Marketing Manager, and Senior Advisor, so I am thoroughly familiar with the work marketers do for a living, which of course affects my research whether I want it to or not. Instead of suppressing my professional background, I have made use of it when gaining access to the field of marketing, when interacting with marketers, when doing the analysis, and when making sense of the findings. Researching well-known situations is problematic for many reasons. My pre-understanding of marketing could result in a narrow outlook; that is, I might not see things other researchers would see simply because I have seen it so many times before. Pre-understanding might also result in unreflexive, naïve and/or egocentric interpretations. The only way out of these dilemmas, as it is for any researcher in any methodological tradition, is to engage in a continuous self-reflexive discussion of the research process and the result of it.

4. Exploring everyday marketing discourse

4.1. *Controversial ideas of marketers and their work*

According to the marketers in this study, their work is about "relationships". This is what they answered when I asked what they *do* when they do marketing work; and according to my observations this is what they say to each other when talking about how business *should* be done; and this is what they say to customers when explaining who they *are*. Marketers are obsessed with relationships, and for good reasons it seems, as these comments from the interviews illustrate.

> Carl: If we have more relationship meetings, we immediately increase our sales. So we try to force our consultants to ring their customers and book meetings, and also to go out and meet them, have dinner with them, talk to them.
> [—]
> Axel: The relationship is often very strong. Then you have to call [the customers] really bad things to mess it up.
> [—]
> Lars: We used to offer some of our initial services for free, but then we didn't create the type of [strong] relationships we wanted. If they pay for it, the relationships become stronger. And then we can sell the really big project.
> [—]

> Linus: Throughout the whole project process, the salesperson keeps the TopTopClient warm, keeps the relationship going. It's a sort of Key Account Manager role, to keep a good relationship. [—] These salespersons have a lot of personal relationships. [They] know the CEO, and if the CEO changes job, the salesperson continues to work with them.

In a Sales Kick-off with some twenty TERRA consultants, Carl was invited by Axel to elaborate his idea of "relationship marketing", with the explicit purpose to persuade the consultants to do more and better sales work. He began his talk like this.

> Carl: There are some people in their fifties who have found out that their family has disappeared because they were at work twenty-two hours per day. And there goes that relationship. [When you lose friends] you feel sad. "Damn, I should have called them months ago, but it never happened". That's how it is with relationships. We need to meet, or to have contact in some way. This is where I see our worst problem. We have no system [for maintaining relationships]. How many of you have structured [the people] you have to keep in contact with? At home you may do as you want. But when we do business! I am very surprised! We live on our relationships!

As Carl continued his presentation, he unfolded a self-reflexive two-sided story. The image of a "greedy" and "bad" salesperson was contrasted with the "honest" and "good" practice of a professional who takes "private and business relationships seriously". Carl shared highly emotional anecdotes that begged the consultants to self-critically reflect upon their relationships with both friends and customers. In so doing Carl was able to criticize the lack of selling activities among the consultants without challenging them directly. Carl returned over again to his theme.

> Carl: [Persuasion] is important when dealing with marketing communication. But, when we talk about business, and the business situation, if we talk about relationships, that's a completely different perspective. [—] If we spend time with a customer, in a project, or when we deliver, it [sooner or later] becomes a private relationship. My family might even start to spend time with my customer's family. [—] You must take care of your relationships. This is *not* about selling. It's a *personal* issue!

Carl and the others argued that business relationships are the *same* as private "non-business" relationships, implying that the same mechanisms of human interaction may be found in business and non-business relationships alike. However, they also argued that business relationships are *profoundly different* from private relationships since the customer knows they are there to do business. Customers are suspicious towards them, which makes marketing work so difficult.

> Linus: When you are in that role you get "no" 99 times and "yes" once. [—] It's the feeling you have [—] when you sit down [with a customer]. The feeling is "that person doesn't want to talk to me".

This suspiciousness isn't directed against other professionals in the marketers' organization. On the contrary, consultants and engineers have a different situation when they face customers, which makes them very good at selling, Carl explained.

> Carl: There is no strategy involved [in the engineers' talk with customers], no ulterior motive, and when these mechanisms are removed then it becomes very…honest… very straightforward, so to speak.

However, when marketers approach customers for business purposes they must act differently.

> Carl: [We deal with] professional services and they are built on relationships, which are built on commitment. [—] Relationships, it's all about giving. I have to give something of myself. I have to care and listen, and give them my time.

In an interview with Lars, he put it more bluntly.

> Lars: [Being into marketing and sales] is a bit like prostitution.

Taking a close look at marketers' omnipresent talk about business relationships I found that most of it is related to the controversy on the who they are to customers, co-workers, other organizational actors, and to themselves. This is not a comment on marketing discourse in the abstract. It is a detailed illustration of the argumentative context – marked by suspicion and mistrust – in which their work is embedded. Followingly, it is in this context contradictory representations of marketing work – as for example "doing business through honest relationships" vs "prostitution" – should be analysed to explore the rhetorical nature of marketing work.

4.2. Finding and inventing customer need

As illustrated above, business relationship talk is full of self-reflexive, contradictory and expansive accounts of who marketers are and not are. As a contrast, I found talk about "satisfaction of customer need" to be the opposite, at least at first sight. This is how Anders and Carl expressed in an interview.

> Carl: In a business relationship you should never forget it's about the need. [—] I mean, if I sell stuff to clean windows, and you have no windows, well then it doesn't matter what I do.
> [—].
> Anders: Our work is selling services, which means you decide together [with the customers], "how are we going to get there". "Well, it is like this… and then you need this help from us… and it costs this much". I can build trust and have them see the need, and they can see what they gain from hiring me [or the organization I represent]. And it's really easy to get satisfied customers [if] you are honest.

Facing a customer with a need is believed to be highly advantageous to the marketer. Then again, although the marketers in this study dealt with similar professional services, their answers to the customers' question "What can you do for me?" were exceptionally diverse. Lars frequently used the compressed expression "We sell money" to indicate the end result of NOVO's services. Axel, on the other hand, used the pragmatic but ambiguous "We can offer a complete solution, but you can also decide which specific service to buy".

It seems as marketers usually do not know what need the customer has when entering a meeting. Take Lars as an example. In the three meetings at which I observed him, he began in the same manner – first some small-talk, then a short presentation of the NOVO model of consulting.

> Lars: This is proven model. We have accomplished about 300 projects, being fairly successful. We are ordinary people. Normally talented, as our customers. We are like the people who will do the job. Everybody can kick the football, but some do it better. We know all the acronyms there are in the business, but we get things done.

Then Lars began probing for cues that would suggest that the customers were in urgent need of NOVO's services, that is, in need of support to "get things done", with the final objective of increasing profitability. Lars told anecdotes to exemplify and specify what NOVO had accomplished in previous projects. These were anecdotes involving a number of senior-level executives. They were also anecdotes full of implicit questions, soaked in arguments for all the negative things that could happen if the customer ignored the parade of problems Lars brought to their attention. However, given the customer's lack of enthusiasm, Lars' anecdotes usually failed to generate a positive response. Then he more or less smoothly changed topic, and told another anecdote, and talked about other people he knew, and people he knew who knew other people. In this manner he managed to cover "cost reductions", "website communication", "career issues", "performance measurement" and "coaching of management" almost in one breath.

Axel, too, covered a range of topics in his pursuit of customer need. Still, whereas Lars told anecdotes about what NOVO had accomplished in earlier projects, Axel targeted the customer's situation more directly by asking short questions.

> Axel: [Is there a need for services regarding] water supply?
> Customer: Nothing right now.
> Axel: We also deal with "soft" parts…
> Customer: We have that internally.
> Axel: Electricity?
> Customer: Headquarter does the buying.
> Axel: What about logistics? Is it managed by business HQ?
> Customer: No, we handle it here.
> Axel: Anything else we could look into?

A month before this sales meeting Axel had arranged a sales course for the group of TERRA consultants that had Axel as sales coach and coordinator. The trainer had the participants practice how to present themselves on the telephone, how to ask questions to identify customer need and how to motivate yourself to do sales work in the first place, which was not obvious for the consultants. They were very reluctant to do sales work. They saw themselves as "problem solvers", not "pushy salespeople". If there is a "real" customer need they would, sort of, be "pulled" to that need, which would not require dubious sales techniques, they argued. When I later observed Axel in the sales meeting I found he applied much of what was taught in the sales course. His questions were both specific and structured, and above all, they were generally formulated in terms of the customer need.

It seems as talk in terms of customer need was used by marketers to explore and exploit the context, to probe for the *specific*, completely different from the self-reflexive relationship talk centered around the marketers themselves. Then again, this finding is based on an analytic distinction between relationship talk and customer need talk, present in conversations full of inconsistencies and controversy. Typically, marketers ask questions to tell stories, they tell stories to ask questions, they talk about private matters in seemingly formal settings, they talk about formal matters in seemingly private settings, and they mix idioms, repertoires and jargons beyond recognition sometimes even in a single sentence.

5. Analysis

5.1. Relationship discourse to overcome distrust

Returning to the overall questions, how do marketers engage in the "centrifugal forces of discourse" (Billig, 1996) to make sense of themselves and their work, and what does this say about the rhetorical nature of marketing work in an industrial setting?

Beginning with the most obvious, marketers' omnipresent and passionate talk about relationships. In a study of marketing practitioners' use of "relationship rhetoric", O' Malley, Patterson, and Kelly-Holmes (2008) argued that the relationship metaphor is theoretically "dead" because it "has become simply a rhetorical device in the professional lexis of marketing academics [—] with little meaning or relevance to the bulk of marketing activities" (O' Malley et al., 2008, p. 168). A similar claim is presented by Jaakkola, who maintains that "the discourses produced by service [and relationship] marketing research are not helping [professional service firm managers] in some key aspects of their marketing and management work" (Jaakkola, 2011, p. 229). A rhetorical interpretation, in the spirit of contradiction, suggests a different conclusion.

Contrary to marketers' central role as intermediates between the organization and the customers, marketers are often marginalized actors in their own organizations (Hackley, 2003). Unsurprisingly then, marketing as a profession has low status (Enright, 2006). Add to this the finding that marketers are distrusted. Marketers do their work in a suspicious and hostile argumentative context, which is supported by my own extensive experience of marketing work. The root of this distrust, drawing on Miles (2018), is the fear that marketers' can and will control, manipulate and persuade people to do and think things against their will. Consequently, marketers need a rhetorical strategy to deal with this distrust and suspicion that lurk in the argumentative context of their work. I suggest that relationship discourse is part of such a strategy.

Based on a discourse analysis of industrial and international marketing research articles, Alajoutsijaärvi, Eriksson & Tikkanen found that the metaphor of "relationships" has exclusively positive associations in marketing. For example, "uncertainty is reduced, resources are joined and costs are divided, problems are solved and new solutions are developed together in more or less harmonious co-operation" when "relationships" is taken into account (Alajoutsijärvi et al., 2001, p. 99). Relationship discourse carries ideas of friendship, dating, courting, intimacy, marriage, divorce, and so forth, into a business context (S. Brown, 1998), which contradict the manipulative practice of a marketer. Being recognized as someone *in possession of* business relationships, or *knowledgeable about* business relationships, or *interested in* business relationships, has positive impact on that professional's image (or *ethos*).

Moreover, talking about business relationships in a highly personal and confessional manner provokes feelings of guilt in the audience for not being proactive enough to contact customers. This line of argument has been acknowledged by von Koskull and Fougère, in their study of service development practices. They found that managers "appeal to a sense of guilt for not doing things in a properly customer oriented way" (von Koskull & Fougère, 2011, p. 211). This a powerful rhetorical strategy, not least because it can be employed in literally every imaginable context, and it will never be disputed.

The overall ideology of relationship marketing proclaims that marketing is embedded in interactions (Skålén, 2010). Marketers are thus obliged, in the name of relationship marketing, to manage anyone who participate in these interactions. By talking up a relationship-oriented marketing strategy, marketers are able to rhetorically justify their presence and their work in every imaginable setting inside and outside an organization.

Finally, relationship talk is also rhetorically useful to blur and obscure marketer's work. This could be understood as a solution to a three-dimensional rhetorical dilemma. Not only must the marketers argue to accomplish something explicit (like a business contract), they must also argue to construct a causal connection between what they did and the specific results they achieve, *and* at the same time deal with the prevailing suspicion towards themselves and their work. Talking in terms of "good relationships" could be seen as a rhetorical strategy for dealing with this dilemma. Once the marketers in my study assessed the result of their work in terms of business relationships, as they generally did, it became virtually impossible to argue they did a bad job. Indeed, I tried. But then they would tell me, convincingly, "it was a good meeting – it improved our relationship". Was it a good meeting? Who knows.

5.2. Customer need discourse to justify marketing activities, and become a marketer

Turning to the discourse on satisfaction of customer need, a first interpretation of the findings suggest that talk in terms of customer need is part of a heuristic strategy. Marketers ask questions about need, because if they find (or invent) a need, they are in a position to offer a solution. Thus, questions are used to probe for business. Addressing explicit or latent customer need is an effective rhetorical strategy by which to justify specific marketing activities (Hackley, 2003; Marion, 2006). The problem the marketers in my study faced was that they did not have a formal education in marketing. They might not be trusted *as* marketers in their own organizations. Arguing that "marketing is all about relationship" could be interpreted as a rhetorical solution to that dilemma. However, the customer need discourse also provides a rhetorically useful resource in this context.

Drawing on Laufer and Paradeise (1990), the discourse of need is rooted in science, which is the domain of specialists. Talk in terms of customer need would imply you are a marketing specialist, and as such crucial to the organization because "identification and satisfaction of customer's needs are the keys to prosperity" (Marion, 2006, p. 250). Consequently, marketers may distinguish themselves from *non*-marketers by arguing in terms of need, because the work of an "authentic" marketer is to identify urgent needs, make the customer see them, and then satisfy them together with the customer. Dealing with customer need is not everybody's business. It takes a certain capacity to find customer need; and, "no need, no business". Compare this with the marketers' claim that relationship marketing, on the contrary, is everybody's business, in the broadest possible sense.

When arguing for business, relationship talk acts as a *centrifugal* discursive force, expanding the domain of marketing work, whereas talk in terms of customer need acts as *centripetal* force, pointing at the essence of conventional marketing management.

6. Discussion and conclusion

So, how do marketers engage in the "centrifugal forces of discourse" (Billig, 1996) to make sense of themselves and their work, and what does this say about the rhetorical nature of marketing work in an industrial setting?

This study presents an argumentative context of marketing work that is thoroughly hostile, leading to the conclusion marketers cannot afford to "hold strong views" when they argue for business. To accomplish marketing work they need to present various and often contradictory rhetorical selves. In other words, becoming a marketer in the eyes of managers, co-workers, customers or researchers is an *option*, not a necessity. From this follows that the marketers in my study are not "full-time" professional marketers *or* "part-time" non-professional marketers, to use Gummesson's (1991) terminology. They draw on contradictory discourses and arguments to talk up "provisional selves", which are transitory solutions to overcome the gap between existing and future role-expectations (Ibarra, 1999, p. 765). It is a form of identity play "to explore possible selves rather than to claim and be granted, desired or ought selves" (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010, p. 11). Understood as rhetorical subjects, marketers engaged in marketing work have no essence outside the persuasive processes. The "authentic personality" of such a subject is one that is *impersonated* in a particular situation.

Fortunately for marketers, marketing discourse is full of textual clichés, shaped by scholars' use of literary means whether they recognize it or not (S. Brown, 2005). As Hackley (2003) argues, and my study illustrates, marketing axioms become slogans, and as such accessible and useful to marketers when they argue for business. In discourse-oriented analyses of marketing, attempts are often made to expose *the* available repertoires that regulate what marketers can talk about, and thus what their practice might entail in general (Ellis & Hopkinson, 2010; Ellis & Rod, 2014; Ellis & Ybema, 2010; Svensson, 2003, 2006). However, as Ellis and Hopkinson (2010) argue, and my study supports, since talk is full of multiple meanings, various repertoires occur together, and sometimes in a contradictory manner. This connects to Whittle's study of management consultancy discourse, where she found that contradictory repertoires were employed for persuasive reasons, "without necessarily reflecting any underlying or stable stance, attitude or approach" (Whittle, 2006, pp. 433–434).

Ellis, Purchase, Chan, and Lowe (2006) argue that theories of marketing – as for example, "relationship marketing" – constructs a discursive "space" in which marketers perform their work. Svensson (2003, 2006) has a similar theoretical outlook, but uses the metaphor of "scene" instead to portray the context of marketing work. My contribution is a conceptualisation of this "space" or "marketing scene" as an *argumentative context* in and through which marketers accomplish their work. This conceptualisation invites a rhetorical analysis of how marketers, argue for business in the spirit of contradiction, similar to the ancient sophists. In the light of the sophist, this study demonstrates how the marketer "migrates nomadically among discourses, never presenting any as 'primary' or privileged in its claim to articulate the truth" (Consigny, 1992, p. 49). The work of a sophist is marked by "occasionality [—] always ready to address improvisationally and confer meaning on new and emerging situations [without a] ready-made audience" (Poulakos, 1995, p. 61).

Moreover, I have found (and experienced) that marketers are haunted by the same identity struggle as the sophists. Modern marketers and ancient sophists share the same accusations on point after point: the work they do is based on manipulation, they are uninterested in "the ends for which their services are bought", their success is measured in the loyalty of their customers, they promote knowledge without "inherent quality" accessible to "anyone who wishes to take the trouble, time and money to learn it", and they are both considered aliens in the situations in which they do their work (Laufer & Paradeise, 1990, pp. 2–6). This fundamental mistrust of marketers and marketing can be found both among practitioners and academics, and still few marketing scholars have made any serious effort to study the consequences of such mistrust, which is unfortunate, Miles argues, because it is precisely here it is most obvious that marketing "in all its manifestations, can be seen to be a [sophistic] rhetorical discipline" (Miles, 2018, p. 130).

To conclude, this paper has illustrated how marketers draw on relationship discourse and customer need discourse on a micro-level when arguing for business. Drawing on Billig (1989, 1996) I have analysed how and why these should be understood as ambiguous and controversial elements of the argumentative context in which marketers do their work, rather than interpretative repertoires with relatively fixed boundaries. This expands the theoretical frame for discourse analysis and hence contribute to the growing stream of discourse-based studies of industrial marketing work.

I have also brought forward an account of multidimensional marketers predestined to argue "in the spirit of contradiction". In so doing I have contributed new understanding of the subject of marketing, which is often ignored in marketing research (Ardley, 2005; Brownlie & Saren, 1997; Woodall, 2012).

Finally, despite the growing interest in everyday discourse in industrial marketing work (Ardley & Quinn, 2014; Dean et al., 2017; Kaski et al., 2017; Loacker & Sullivan, 2016; Lowe et al., 2012; Schepis et al., 2014) – and the general call for studies of work that takes language seriously (Barley & Kunda, 2001; Okhuysen et al., 2015) – there are few studies of marketing work that draws on the rhetorical tradition. This paper has tried to overcome this gap with a rhetorically informed account of marketing work in the light of the sophists.

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