01

The evolution of marketing categories

There are two kinds of people… people who think there are two kinds of people, and people who don't.

Why is our urge to categorize consumers so pervasive? One simple answer: this is the way our brains work. Psychologists know that when we encounter a new object (or person), within milliseconds our immediate response is to put it into a familiar category. Good or bad? Weak or strong? Binary code: 0 or 1? Regular or decaf? Ready-to-wear or *haute couture*? Swipe left or swipe right?

Build cages and put people into them, depending upon the categories we assign to them in those first fleeting moments. Perhaps this mindset is a holdover from the caveman days, when the choice about how to label a person literally was life or death.

Imagine a prehistoric man wandering across the savannah. Suddenly he spies a stranger heading his way. It's time for a really quick judgment call: friend or foe? The wrong answer can turn out quite badly for him, to say the least. Today we short-circuit this dilemma with a handshake, a gesture that evolved to assure others that you are not holding a weapon. And this stand-in looks like it will evolve to an elbow bump post-pandemic. Even with this more civilized solution, our "good or bad" decision process isn't that much different from that of our ancient ancestors.

Marketing categories are cultural categories

If you stop to think about it, just about everything you know belongs to a category. In some cases, your brain has done the heavy lifting of assigning an object a label, but often each of us simply obeys pre-existing structures our culture has taught us. Meanings that we impart to products reflect underlying cultural categories, which correspond to the basic ways in which we characterize the world.[1] Our culture makes distinctions between different times of the day, such as between leisure and work hours, as well as many other differences, such as between genders, occasions, groups of people, and so on.

And the marketing system conveniently provides us with products that signify these categories. For example, the clothing industry gives us labels to denote certain times and wearing occasions such as formal, business professional, business casual, resort wear and even (shudder) Casual Fridays. It differentiates between leisure clothes and work clothes, and it promotes masculine, feminine or unisex styles. It labels itself in other ways to denote price points and suitable age groups, such as Haute Couture, Designer, Ready to Wear, Bridge or Contemporary.

We find similar gradations no matter where we look across the cultural spectrum. Think about the following categories we use every day: Appetizer, Entrée, or Dessert? Conservative and Unionist Party, Liberal Democrats, Labour Party, or Scottish National Party? Danish Modern, Rustic, Shabby Chic or Industrial? FA Premier League, League 1, Bundesliga or Serie A? Novice, Intermediate or Expert? Sedan, Coupe, Convertible or SUV? Fiction or nonfiction? Slapper, Prim, or Chav?

We internalize these underlying configurations almost from birth, even though we may not be aware just how well-worn our judgments may be. Consider for example the categories that underly the TV shows, movies, and popular novels we avidly consume. In an extreme case like a romance novel, you can actually work with a template to "write" your own tearjerker by systematically varying certain set elements of the story! Essentially, all you need to do is fill

in the blanks as you decide whether the beleaguered heroine will be an innocent teenager, a jaded socialite, an ambitious career woman, and so on.[2] Add a few familiar clichés like a "heaving bosom" and the "brutish hero who's really a scared little kitten" and perhaps you've got a hit on your hands.

Other familiar art forms such as TV follow the same pattern. Consider well-known genres like these types of shows, and some of the cultural formulae they almost always follow:[3]

TABLE 1.1 Cultural formulae in media genres

Genre	Classic western	Science fiction	Hard-boiled detective	Family sitcom
Time	1800s	Future	Present	Any time
Location	Edge of civilization	Space	City	Suburbs
Protagonist	Cowboy (lone individual)	Astronaut	Detective	Father (figure)
Heroine	Schoolmistress	Space girl	Damsel in distress	Mother (figure)
Locomotion	Horse	Spaceship	Beat-up car	Station wagon/ SUV
Weaponry	Six-gun, rifle	Ray guns	Pistol, fists	Insults

Who builds the cages?

Where do the cages we've been discussing come from? Did Moses come down from the mountain and declare that the fashion industry will follow four seasons: Spring/Summer, Fall/Winter, Resort, and Pre-Fall? Did he give us other schemes, like Fiction/Non-Fiction, etc. or Danish Modern/Shabby Chic, etc.? Obviously not, but most businesses are very reluctant to challenge the established order—even if their customers do.

Traditional knowledge structures use pre-established systems to sort content. Taxonomies are classifications that experts create; for example, you may have learned (and perhaps forgotten) the classic

system that biologists use to categorize organisms (the Linnaean taxonomy) that places any living thing in terms of Kingdom, Phylum, Class, Order, Family, Genus, and Specie.[4]

These taxonomic structures are often logical, comprehensive, and quite useful. The problem is, they don't necessarily mirror how people actually think. Unless we've been trained (or indoctrinated) to follow a certain pre-ordained system, we're likely to come up with other ways to sort out what we know. We may develop folksonomies instead. These are sets of labels, or tags, individuals choose in a way that makes sense to them, as opposed to using predefined keywords. You may sort your own clothing inventory in your own way, perhaps with labels such as Good for Clubbing, Out of Style, or No Longer Fits.

The divergence between taxonomies and folksonomies can create two problems for a business or other organization:

Customers may need help to translate the language an industry uses into parameters they understand.

As customers create their own knowledge structures, they may be comparing purchase alternatives that don't track the way the vertical professionals view their competitors.

Thus, a perfumer distinguishes among fragrances in terms of their top notes, heart notes, and base notes. A customer is more likely to label competing brands as citrusy, bold, pricey, feminine, or the one that Kim Kardashian recently blogged about.

We can readily observe this disconnect when we compare the way that Amazon organizes its e-commerce platform with the way that customers talk about what the company sells. Amazon uses a logical taxonomy as it subdivides the site into sections such as (1) books; (2) movies, music, and games; and (3) computer and office products. Then, within the books section, the customer can explore genres such as sci-fi and fantasy.

The scientific method needs categories

Rigorous research in the hard sciences and a substantial bit of the social sciences rests on the scientific method, which emphasizes the

importance of an objective approach to understanding natural phenomena. As an outgrowth of modernism, this paradigm tried to correct for what its founders believed was an understanding of the world based upon superstition and "non-rational" explanations for everything from the movement of the stars to social deviance.

In tandem with the Industrial Revolution that began in the late nineteenth century, technology rather than religion reigned supreme. Engineers, inventors and scientists became the "new priests" who celebrated a dawning age of rationality.

Streamlined, symmetrical skyscrapers took the place of ornately decorated cathedrals. People began to "worship" science as a panacea. The 1964 World's Fair in New York was the apogee of this belief in technology to solve the world's problems. It unveiled wonders like the Picturephone (long before Zoom Happy Hours), jet packs, and a General Motors exhibit that promised us moon colonies, commuter spaceships, moving walkways, and underwater hotels in the near future.[5]

The modernist, or positivist, searches for objective facts. Through a process of systematic discovery, he or she believes it is possible to identify basic laws that govern the way things work in this world. The truth is out there. We just have to find it.

Laboratories vs. the real world

A basic dichotomy scientists revere is In Here vs. Out There. To study a phenomenon, we need to isolate it from its naturally occurring context. This enables us to eliminate "confounds" that may obscure the true cause of what we observe. We dutifully take a sample, bring it into a sterile laboratory, and manipulate it while we hold everything else constant (to the extent possible). If we observe any changes after we're done, we have much greater confidence that they relate to what we did, rather than to some other unruly stuff going on in the real world.

For years, we've put customers into neat little cages, such as age groups, income groups or gender groups. We might collect (or more likely, purchase) data on buyers who have been classified in certain ways such as male or female, married or single, low-income or

affluent. Then we'll create cross-tabulations within the dataset so that we can compare people whom we've identified as, say, married males who don't make a lot of money versus single females who do quite well. We happily slice-and-dice the data in many ways to compare purchase rates, attitudes toward our brand, or whatever we need to explore.

A little secret that statisticians know: if you relentlessly try different analyses as you go on what they like to call a fishing expedition, you may well come up with "results" just by chance. But it's hard to argue with positive results. If we discover a difference in these cross-tabs, we're happy because now we "know" people who fall into one cell differ from those in another.

CAUSATION VS. CORRELATION

When we find these disparities, it's tempting to conclude that our descriptive variables "cause" the differences. But that's a tough sell to a statistician—even when the relationships seem "obvious." For example, descriptive studies show that people who buy more diapers are also likely to buy more beer. Is the act of buying diapers so stressful that it motivates us to double down on our brew purchases? Do people who put on a beer buzz wind up going on a diaper buying spree? You can guess that instead, both types of purchases most likely are driven by something else going on in these people's lives.

The familiar caveat, "correlation does not imply causation" can be a hard pill to swallow. That's the case especially when an industry's hired guns use it to rebut compelling findings, such as the oft-reported relationship between heavy cigarette smoking and high mortality rates. As much as we "know" this makes sense, the tobacco industry has pushed back for decades by reminding us that heavy smokers may also exhibit other lifestyle factors that could (at least in theory) account for their tendency to keel over at higher rates than nonsmokers.

In fairness, let's not throw the baby out with the bathwater. The tried-and-true scientific method still offers many powerful applications, even in the soft sciences. This controlled approach is especially

valuable to understand more micro-level marketing questions that don't rely so heavily upon the respondent's external environment, such as those that involve physiological changes or basic perceptual processes.

For example, if we want to understand how shoppers respond to minute changes in package designs, or perhaps whether the way we frame a statement about a product specification influences the likelihood shoppers will remember it accurately, this is still the way to go. If we want to see whether a teenager is less likely to vape when he knows his friends disapprove, or if a young woman will order the cheap burger or the pricey steak on a first date, perhaps not so much.

THE REAL WORLD IS YOUR MARKETING LABORATORY

If we want to understand a lot of social phenomena where a customer's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors probably depend upon social cues such as how others in the same situation respond, context is king. The other squishy things going on in the real-world environment are precisely the things that influence our interpretations of the social setting and that give us clues about how we should be thinking and acting.

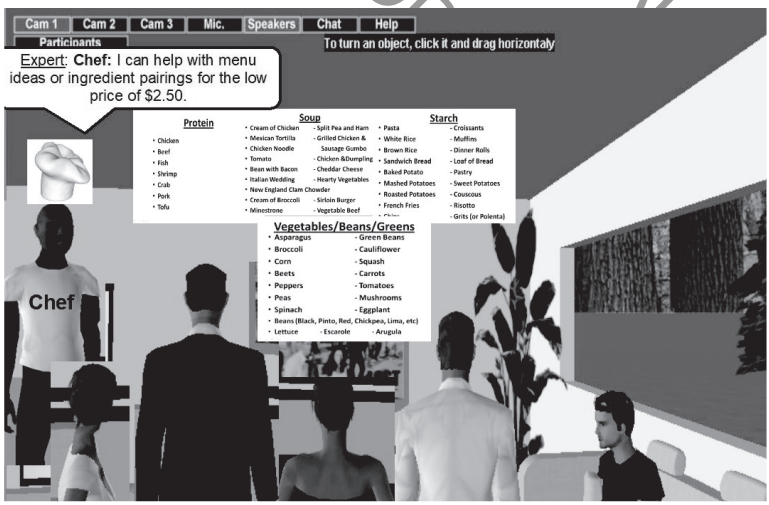
So, ironically, the better we are at purifying the research setting, the less likely that setting will mimic what really goes on when the subject leaves the laboratory. That's one reason why it's valuable to use multiple research methods where possible in order to triangulate on an issue. This might involve a combination of controlled/sterile experiments with uncontrolled/realistic observations of consumers in their natural habitats so that hopefully the results will converge across methods.

For example, Campbell executed a variety of approaches to help the venerable company grapple with a big problem: young people just don't eat as much soup as they used to. A research team immersed itself in Millennial culture. They conducted face-to-face interviews and focus groups, but they also ate meals with young people in their homes, checked out their pantries, and tagged along with them on shopping trips to the grocery store.

It was only after this immersion process that the team was able to identify the "pain points" that younger consumers seem to associate with canned soups. For example, their Millennial respondents told them that the soups are too "processed" and they taste bland, homogeneous, and unexciting. Another common complaint was the lack of healthy ingredients these young consumers look for, such as quinoa and on-trend veggies like kale. This group includes "flexitarians," that is, they eat vegetarian for a few days and then eat meat on the weekends, special occasions, to satisfy a craving, etc. They tend to care about sustainability, local sourcing, and company practices.

These insights led the company to tweak its approach; one obvious response was to change the packaging from a can to a pouch, because respondents said that a pouch communicates a "fresher ingredients" message.[6] In some additional work I did with the company, we recruited Millennials to work together in a virtual environment as teams competed with other teams to come up with novel soup flavors that would appeal to people like them. These are the kinds of insights that just won't turn up in a large-scale, statistically reliable but rather sterile attitude survey.

FIGURE 1.1 A "virtual world" we created to help Campbell engage Millennials



How our schemas shape our decisions

If we want to evaluate an object in isolation rather than judging it relative to other, somewhat similar things we've already encountered in the world, we're probably fighting a losing battle. Our brains are literally wired to process new information by comparing it to what we already know and then assigning it to a tidy category: a place for everything, and everything in its place. The meaning we assign to a stimulus depends on the schema, or set of beliefs, to which we assign it. This in turn leads us to compare the stimulus to other, similar ones we encountered in the past. And these judgments have a nasty tendency to persist even when they're downright wrong.

Identifying and evoking the correct schema is crucial to many marketing decisions. This labeling process determines what criteria consumers will use to evaluate the product, package, or message. Thus, if we determine that a new product is a dark, carbonated beverage we'll probably compare it to colas we've tasted in the past. Our poor, overworked brains would probably start to emit a cloud of steam if that liquid is poured out of a can that features colors like green rather than red or blue. We've learned to assume that citrusy soft drinks always reside in green containers, while colas reliably live in red or blue ones.

These learned assumptions can make or break a new product that doesn't conform to what we expect to find. Extra Strength Maalox Whip Antacid flopped, even though a spray can is a pretty effective way to deliver the product. To consumers, aerosol whips mean dessert toppings, not medication. A new brand of frozen dog food met a similar fate; we just don't expect to find Fido's meals in the frozen foods section of our grocery store.[7]

In one study that looked at how labels impact our preferences, a college cafeteria gave menu items descriptive labels (e.g., Red Beans with Rice versus Traditional Cajun Red Beans with Rice, Chocolate Pudding versus Satin Chocolate Pudding) so that diners could more easily categorize it. Sales increased by more than 25 percent with the enhanced labels.[8]

Again, the way we make sense of the world—and readily assign objects as well as people to categories—depends on the fundamental assumptions we form about the way that world works. For example, something as simple as the location of a product's image on a package influences the way our brains make sense of it. Due to what we have learned about the law of gravity (heavy objects sink and light objects float), we assume that if a product's image appears lower down on the front of the container, it must weigh more than do products that appear higher up in the photo.

In addition, objects on the right of a frame appear heavier than products that appear on the left of a frame. This interpretation results from our intuition about levers: we know that the farther away an object is from a lever's fulcrum, the more difficult it is to raise the item. Because we read from left to right, the left naturally becomes the visual fulcrum and thus we perceive objects on the right as heavier. Manufacturers should bear these package schematics in mind because they may influence our feelings about the contents in a package, for better or worse. Think, for example, about a diet food marketer who wants shoppers to think about its products as "lighter" than other options.[9]

How our brains create schemas

Our brains don't just assign a new piece of information to one category. The schemas we form look more like spider webs than they do cages with only one door (no, not literally: don't panic; we don't have actual webs lurking inside our heads, even though a hangover may feel like you do).

We develop knowledge structures that link individual pieces of data to one another in terms of some relation we think they have. This connection is a node. Actually, these structures also resemble the social networks we belong to that allow messages to pass among individuals who are linked to one another in some way. This sort of structure probably is more familiar to you after the pandemic, because it turns out even a virus travels this way. That's why we heard so much talk about "connectors" and "vectors" of infection

as people passed the virus to those they encountered in their various networks.

If a marketer shows us a picture of a package, this stimulus may directly activate a memory of that brand. But this may also work indirectly, if that memory connects to others you've acquired. It's much like tapping a spider web; other parts of it reverberate as well. For example, say a person catches a snippet of the song *Conversations in the Dark* by John Legend. She may start to hum the rest of it—or perhaps an image of herself in her bridal gown suddenly pops into her mind because (as it turns out) this was her wedding song. And then she finds herself dwelling upon related memories such as the taste of the wedding cake or even how her rich uncle had the nerve to give such a paltry gift.

We store our memories for brands in different ways. For example, a male teen rolling his trolley through the personal care aisle may see a bottle of Axe deodorant; this could trigger a memory of a commercial he saw for the product, or perhaps the last time he applied the product to get ready for a hot date. Here are some ways that our memories can represent brand information:

- **Brand-specific**—Memory is stored in terms of claims the brand makes ("it's macho").
- **Ad-specific**—Memory is stored in terms of the medium or content of the ad itself (a macho-looking guy uses the product).
- **Brand identification**—Memory is stored in terms of the brand name (e.g., "Axe").
- **Product category**—Memory is stored in terms of how the product works or where it should be used (a bottle of Axe sits in a guy's medicine cabinet).
- **Evaluative reactions**—Memory is stored as positive or negative emotions ("that looks cool").[10]

How does this elaborate storage process benefit us? One reason that our brains love to assign things to categories is simple efficiency. It's quite difficult to decide if something is good or bad unless we answer the question, "Compared to what?" Every industry creates

nomenclature and categories so that both buyers and sellers can quickly identify a relevant set of competitors. This labeling process also facilitates judgments about which of the entrants in a category are "better" than the others.

That assignment is absolutely crucial to your brand's fortunes. The reason is that the way people evaluate it depends a lot upon the other members of the category to which it's been assigned. The most successful welterweight boxer might not so fare so well if he fights men in heftier categories such as super middleweight, light heavyweight, or cruiserweight.

In the same way, brands in the apparel space such as Maje, Jaeger, and Ted Baker are classified as bridge lines. A manager for Ted Baker might be quite happy to compete against other, similar lines – but not too thrilled to be lumped into the luxury brand category and be compared against the likes of Hermès, Chanel, and Prada. Suddenly he's "punching above his weight."

The question of which category you get assigned to holds enormous strategic ramifications. Ideally, you want to choose a category you can dominate. You won't have that option if, for example, you launch a new basketball shoe that immediately gets compared to heavyweights like Nike. This is yet another reason why inventing a new, or hybrid, category can be a great solution; you get to write the rules. Determinant attributes are the criteria that buyers use to choose one brand over others in a category. To the extent possible, don't allow your brand to be judged on the attributes at which your competitors excel if you can introduce your own where you do instead. One of my favorite examples is a move PepsiCo made in the 1990s when the company suddenly introduced "freshness dating" on its soda cans. At least for a time, it turned a non-issue into a determinant attribute – even though buyers consume the very large majority of cans before they ever approach the point of becoming stale![11]

Me vs. other

The most basic and powerful distinction we humans make is Me (or Us) vs. Other. Our history is essentially the story of ingroups vs.

outgroups. We seem to be "wired" to favor others whom we feel share the same identity, even when that identity is superficial and virtually meaningless.

This urge to distinguish ourselves from others is so pervasive that we will seize upon virtually any reason to do so. The fact that one person is placed in a group with some other people and not with others, even when there is absolutely no reason to differentiate, is enough to create a powerful group identity.

Social psychologists have demonstrated this tendency in numerous studies that use a methodology they call the minimal group paradigm. They will take a set of people, previously unknown to one another, who show up for a laboratory experiment and arbitrarily form them into groups. Perhaps they will ask one group to wear a name tag that says "A" and another to wear a "B." Even though there is no discernible reason to do so, inevitably researchers find that if you're an "A" you favor other "A's" and you believe your group is "better" than others.[12] And we wonder why we have so many wars.

The imperative to make these distinctions becomes even more salient during uncertain times such as the recent pandemic. Fear of The Other was drastically magnified. Suddenly the need to practice extreme "social distancing" elevated everyone's awareness of Self vs. Other to almost hysterical proportions. Not surprising, since virtually any person who is not Me (even a loved one) has the potential to make Me sick.

The quest to identify "friend vs. foe" will always be there for us. But our definition of what makes others into the good guys versus the bad guys does change. Sometimes brands and the people who work for them are The Other. For example, in recent years we've seen that consumers increasingly mistrust marketers (in addition to politicians and others who control mass media and economic resources). A 2019 survey of 25,000 respondents in eight global markets was concerning: only a third of respondents said they trust most of the brands they buy and use and even that abysmal figure dropped to less than a quarter in some markets including France and Germany.[13]

But in the silver linings department, a curious thing happened during the pandemic: consumers increasingly looked to brands to play a major role in recovery. In fact, in another global survey in March 2020 by the same organization, more than half of respondents agreed that marketers are responding quicker and more effectively to the pandemic than have their governments![14]

As Rahm Emanuel, the former mayor of Chicago observed, "Never let a serious crisis go to waste. And what I mean by that it's an opportunity to do things you think you could not do before."[15] Friends change, enemies change. So do labels.

Gain insights by studying consumer chameleons in their real-world habitats

To truly understand today's customer, it's often smart to use naturalistic techniques that require researchers to "live with the natives." Breach the cage that separates you from your customers. Get out of your office and meet the people who love your brand. Be sure to talk to some who don't as well. What do they love about your brand? What do they hate? What would they improve?

True, many marketing researchers still pursue "the truth" via basic survey research, but this gets more difficult in our frenzied world. When was the last time you happily interrupted your dinner to respond to a phone survey?

The secret to predicting consumer behavior

Well, it's actually not such a secret after all. But it's worth keeping in mind: the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior.

To the extent that we're able to know what our customers have done before (and hopefully why), we're better able to make an educated guess about what they will do the next time a similar situation arises. Obviously. Indeed, this simple (yet profound?) statement is what's behind the entire science of tracking what people buy and where they buy it, whether in stores or online. It's

particularly crucial in the e-commerce space, where algorithms serve up new ads based upon the places we've already browsed.

But note that even this knowledge is not a panacea, and our informed predictions will never come close to being 100 percent accurate. People have a nasty tendency to crave novelty if they can get it without sacrificing too much. It may not be rational to try a new brand when you're perfectly happy with your current one – but we do it all the time.

Even so, there's no better way to come close to hitting the mark when it comes to estimating what consumers will do in the future. The quest for variety-seeking is likely to be stronger among people who like to flirt with a variety of brands – so it's the ones who are in a strong relationship we want to identify. That's why it almost always makes sense to identify a brand's heavy users, even though numerically they are unlikely to be in the majority of all buyers.

Remember the famous 80/20 rule. This is the marketing version of a broader principle known as the Pareto Law, named after the economist who proposed that in many scenarios the majority of the effects come from a small number of causes.

So, in our world, this means that 80 percent of your revenues will come from 20 percent of your customers. Although this ratio is not set in stone, it's surprising how often it comes close. That's a potent reminder of the importance of your heavy users—and they're also crucial because they can be your most powerful salesforce. But more on that later.

THE POWER OF THE BUYER PERSONA

How do we understand that heavy user? It's common today for a brand to create a fictional profile of a "core customer" who inspires product design and communications decisions. Marketers refer to these profiles as buyer personas (or sometimes brand avatars). Essentially you write a "story" about your ideal customer based on market research and real data about your existing customers.[16] The character helps you to connect with the type of person you hope to reach and he or she gives you a more concrete way to think about your customers.

FIGURE 1.2 A hypothetical persona of a marketing manager

Byron

Age
25 to 34 years

Highest Level of Education
Bachelor's degree (e.g. BA, BS)

Social Networks

Industry
Technology

Organization Size
501–1000 employees

Preferred Method of Communication

- Social Media

Tools They Need to Do Their Job

- Content Management Systems
- Business Intelligence Dashboards
- Email
- Project Manager

Job Responsibilities

Content creation, build inbound traffic

Their Job Is Measured By

Team productivity, sales revenue

Reports to

CMO

Goals or Objectives

Maximize revenue
Demonstrate his value to superiors whenever possible

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For example, Chip Wilson, who founded the popular clothing company Lululemon, relied upon a "muse" he made up: a 32-year-old professional single woman named Ocean who makes $100,000 a year. He described Ocean as "engaged, has her own condo, is traveling, fashionable, has an hour and a half to work out a day." This ideal user, according to Wilson, appeals to all women: "If you're 20 years old or you're graduating from university, you can't wait to be that woman. If you're 42 years old with a couple of children, you wish you had that time back."

Lululemon added a male "muse" when the company moved into menswear: Duke is 35 and an "athletic opportunist" who surfs in the summer and snowboards in the winter. When he got involved in

a new company, Kit and Ace, sure enough Wilson helped to come up with two new muses: One was a woman he called Kit, a 29-year-old single woman who works in graphic design or fashion and loves to bike on weekends. The other was Ace, a 32-year-old male who likes to drink strong coffee, hang out with friends in breweries, and who dabbles in CrossFit."[17] Sound like anyone you know (hint: definitely not your humble author!)?

A cautionary note: it's often very useful to create personas for your brand but be very careful about the assumptions you make. Brand managers have a tendency to envision the customer they want to have, not necessarily the one they actually serve. Research (including my own) shows that marketing professionals are notoriously inaccurate when it comes to predicting the consumption behaviors of the public.[18]

And another: don't get trapped in the cage you build for your persona! As we've already seen, consumer chameleons take on multiple identities—sometimes in the course of a day. That's why at the least it's important to recognize that your persona (sometimes also called a brand avatar) more likely is really several personas. Different versions may emerge on different occasions. The persona you painstakingly create to understand the primary buyer of, say, industrial equipment is probably not the same one who heads to a club after she clocks out of the office.

Naturalistic research methods add flavor to the mix

We're witnessing a rebirth of qualitative methods like ethnography that encourage analysts to observe their customers in their natural settings. In other words, watch how consumers actually use products in their everyday habitats. A brand that wants to get the real lowdown on what drives the choices of teenage girls is probably better off sending a young female employee to crash a real-life slumber party than bringing these girls into a laboratory and asking them to gossip about their fantasies, frustrations, and favorite exfoliators.

Fish where the fish are.

Although we may pick up a lot of static in natural environments, we also get a level of richness that is very hard to come by in more well-ordered research settings. As we've already seen, the goal of a controlled experiment is to do just what the term implies—control as much of the environment as possible so that only the specific factors (we call them independent variables) of interest get manipulated.

THE CUSTOMER JOURNEY MAP

This ever-changing customer is one reason that many organizations buy into the idea of creating customer journey maps. A mapping project involves a very precise tracking of the experiences your customers actually have when they interact with your product, store or service. One important goal is to identify the "pain points" they encounter along the way to reduce the amount of friction people experience. This process involves several basic steps:

1. Identify your buyer persona
2. Identify goals
3. Map out buyer touchpoints
4. Identify pain points
5. Prioritize and fix roadblocks
6. Take the customer journey yourself!
7. Update and Improve

There are many ways to measure these experiences, such as identifying KPIs (Key Performance Indicators), devising customer satisfaction measures, or simply adopting the widely used NPS (Net Promoter Score). The important thing is to measure, and measure often.

But perhaps the most important step is #6: take the customer journey yourself! Too many times managers sit in their plush offices and imagine what their customers experience rather than doing what the Japanese call going to the gemba (roughly, the exact place at which the event occurs).

It's only by living through the experience in their shoes that you can truly appreciate the problem. For example, in one project a company that operates food concessions in big airports dispatched its executives to buy meals at these sites. It was only when they lived this process for themselves that they stumbled upon a problem with which many of us can identify: when you're traveling by yourself with luggage, it's very stressful to have to leave your bags in order to procure your meal—especially when you can't see these belongings across the room. The company was able to reconfigure the setting so that there was a clear line of sight between the cash register and all the tables. Now if they could do something about the food...

Understanding and marketing to the new consumer

The fluidity of consumer identity actually is not a new story. A chapter in Douglas Coupland's influential 1991 book *Generation X* (that's where the term came from) declared, "I am not a market segment."[19] People have been trying on different personalities for years as they strive to break out of their own little cages. We've come a long way from the drab, conforming "Organization Man" of the 1950s.

Welcome to the wild, wacky world of the postmodern consumer. Today, a consumer's consumption choices are a lot more varied and complicated than they used to be, as seemingly endless options to spend our time and money entice us. It's a fertile environment for consumer chameleons.

In fact, it's fair to propose that one of the biggest challenges of modern life today isn't that there isn't enough choice. *Au contraire*. It's that there's too much. Consumer researchers refer to this problem as hyperchoice.[20] Want to buy a new shade of lipstick? Here's a few hundred for you to ponder. A new tie? Ditto. During the 1990s, the average grocery store sold 7,000 products. Today that number exceeds 40,000 items.[21]

Our job isn't getting any easier, as companies overwhelm us with more and more features. We deal with 50-button remote controls,

digital cameras with hundreds of mysterious features and book-length manuals, and cars with dashboard systems worthy of the space shuttle. Experts call this spiral of complexity feature creep. As evidence that the proliferation of gizmos is counterproductive, Philips Electronics found that at least half of the products buyers return have nothing wrong with them; consumers simply couldn't understand how to use them! What's worse, on average the buyer spent only 20 minutes trying to figure out how to use the product and then gave up.

Choice abounds, but so does an important paradox: as consumers get more options to choose from, they actually make poorer choices!

And to rub salt into the wound, research evidence suggests shoppers are less likely to buy anything at all as the number of options increases. Essentially, they get so overwhelmed that they throw up their hands and make a quick exit to avoid having to wade through all of their options. That's why—as we'll see later—it's so crucial for marketers to understand that they play a hugely important role as editors or curators who intervene to whittle down options to a manageable number.

The new consumers belong to microsegments

Although we're faced with a profusion of brands, until fairly recently we didn't see huge differences in consumption across groups of people, especially when we control for income. As "tribes" waxed and waned, they were likely to include large swaths of the population. For example, Flower Children in the 1960s did their own thing, but because most were tuned in to the big record labels and magazines of the time everyone's sartorial rebellion looked pretty much the same. Are those your tie-dyed jeans or mine?

Fast forward to today, when we truly live in an era of market fragmentation. Just as our TV viewing options have expanded to thousands of channels today, the monolithic market segments of that time have decomposed into innumerable micro-segments. In the period from 2009 to 2015 for example, the total number of

TV channels the European Union established grew by 49 percent from 3,615 TV channels to 5,370.[22]

The postmodern consumer blithely travels from one micro-segment to another. The only constant we can count on from our new consumer chameleons is that they will adopt the coloration of many segments in the course of a decade, a year, or perhaps even a day.

To see this splintering in action, just visit any decent-sized magazine stand. Count the staggering number of publications that give us a glimpse into obscure lifestyles ranging from yachting to coding to pumping iron. Stroll through the food court in a typical shopping mall. You can choose from a dizzying range of ethnic foods—Chinese, Italian, American, sushi, Thai, and Mexican—or perhaps combine them all on the same plate.

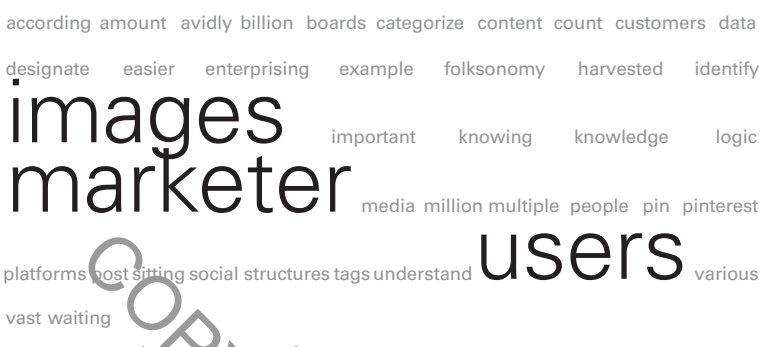
Clearly, the long-standing "one size fits all" (or at least "three networks fit all") model has to go. At least a handful of consumer behavior researchers have advocated a more fluid approach to understanding our brand choices for quite a while. These "interpretivists" like to muddy the waters rather than clearing them up. They stress the importance of symbolic, subjective experience, and the idea that meaning is in the mind of the person.

In this view, we each construct our own beliefs based upon our unique and shared cultural experiences, so there are no objectively right or wrong answers. No black and white, just shades of gray. "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." "One man's meat is another man's poison." "That's why they make chocolate and vanilla." You get the idea…

This subjective thinking is one of the hallmarks of post-modernism.

To Amazon's credit, its system does allow customers to create their own folksonomies by tagging items with labels that make sense to them. Amazon empowers its users to organize and classify its offerings using their own tags. These tags are entirely user-generated, so users can search their own tags and the tags of others. Thus, we can find George R. R. Martin's *Game of Thrones* under Sci-fi & Fantasy, but we can also search using words and phrases

FIGURE 1.3 An example of a tag cloud



SOURCE Created at www.tagcrowd.com

that past readers have included in their reviews, such as "highly recommend," "HBO series," and "ice and fire."

Why wouldn't a marketer want to use the same knowledge structures as his or her customers? It's easier than ever to identify these, because so many social media platforms allow users to designate multiple tags that categorize the content they see or post according to their own folksonomy. For example, more than 320 million Pinterest users avidly pin images to various Boards (more than 200 billion at last count).[23]

This vast amount of data is just sitting there, waiting to be harvested by enterprising marketers who understand that knowing what people do with their images is even more important than whether they "like" them or not. For example, a quick search using the keywords "sophisticated" brings up a slew of brands and celebrities including Victoria Beckham, Bulgari, Jones New York, Emma Watson – but also descriptors such as street style, classy, and even bathroom design. Folksonomies rule.

At a more modest level, you can mine virtually any text that people post to give you a handle on how they're describing a brand or other concept. A tag cloud is a visual display of the frequency with which words are used. It's easy and useful to parse content, whether textual or visual, just by identifying the elements people use and how much overlap there is among customers. Figure 1.3

shows a simple example of a tag cloud that diagrams the content of the paragraph just above this one.

The new consumer buys horizontally, not vertically

In this postmodern view, our world is a *pastiche*, or mixture of images and ideas.[24] Our consumption choices are most valuable when they question boundaries and force us to venture outside of our little cages. Perhaps it helps to think of this process like a music playlist: a record company thinks in terms of specific musical genres like Hip-Hop, Country, and Classical. It has to, because that's the way industry groups and publications count purchases and downloads.

But listeners don't always think in these terms at all. They build different playlists for different occasions in their lives. Their MP3 files may carry labels like Working Out at Home During the Coronavirus, Our Courtship Days in College, or Doing Housework. And each of these lists may include entries from multiple industry classifications as they weave from Rihanna to The Beatles to Taylor Swift.

We see the impact of postmodernism quite vividly when we look at how consumers around the world integrate foreign products with indigenous practices in a process of creolization:

- The Indian music hybrid called *Indipop* mixes traditional styles with rock, rap, and reggae.[25]
- Natives in Papua New Guinea pound on drums adorned with Chivas Regal wrappers and substitute Pentel pens for their traditional nose bones.[26]
- Young Hispanic Americans bounce between hip-hop and *Rock en Español*, blend Mexican rice with spaghetti sauce, and spread peanut butter and jelly on tortillas.[27]
- In Turkey some urban women use their ovens to dry clothes and rinse muddy spinach in their dishwashers.
- When an Ethiopian princess marries a Zulu king, tribesmen watch *Pluto Tries to Become a Circus Dog* on a Viewmaster while a band plays *The Sound of Music*.[28]

In today's "interesting times," technological and societal changes free up more of us to be cultural chameleons. The fragmentation of society, and of media, exposes the consumer to many more possible selves, or visions of possible identities that weren't accessible just a few decades ago.[29] A postmodern society that refutes the tenets of modernism by blending categories together allows us to experiment with new options. It demolishes the cages we keep trying to use to squeeze postmodern customers into modernist containers.

Create new products that defy conventional categories

What business are you in—really? Answer this seemingly obvious question not in terms of what you produce, but what people consume. If you run a dance company, your competitors include other dance companies—but also perhaps museums, cooking classes, or even bars. Remember, a company makes pillows, but buyers consume sleep.

Consider a pathway to success that's a bit unorthodox—but often quite effective. See if you can create a roadmap of the established categories in your vertical. Then, disrupt them. This strategy worked for Uber and the taxi industry, Netflix and the video rental industry, and Amazon for the publishing industry.

Of course, sometimes a failure to play by the rules can come back to bite you if your product is so different from the norm that customers don't understand it. For example, a men's hair-removal product met a quick demise. Even though the solution is more efficient than a daily shaving routine, the potential buyers couldn't buy into an alternative method that they associated with women's products.

Still, there are lots of great opportunities if you can create a new category, or "color between the lines" of two existing ones. Chrysler did that when its designers combined the features of a station wagon and a sedan, and then again when the company created the new SUV category in the 1990s. Swarovski did it too, by creating a stylish piece of jewelry that is also a wearable computer to monitor the wearer's heart rate. And there's the exploding

athleisure category in apparel; a hybrid of the athleticwear and leisurewear spaces that is so successful the Merriam-Webster Dictionary now lists it.

Or, maybe you can fuse a fashion product with a functional one. We saw this during the pandemic when designers like Gucci and Fendi started to produce high-end facemasks for trendy social distancers.[30]

When I worked as a consultant for a very large textile company, I came to appreciate what opening cages can mean. As I worked with engineers who were developing "smart garments," I found that they saw something other than silky legs when they thought about pantyhose. Instead they viewed the product as a "delivery system" they could use to apply a variety of substances directly to the body, such as vitamins, medications and even caffeine (which reduces the appearance of cellulite) to the body. By adding microencapsulation that releases small amounts of these things as the woman moves, they recreated the concept of what stockings can do. (Of course, they still had to look good when they delivered these additives!)

Managers love to invoke the cliché "think outside the box" (perhaps to silent groans from their employees), but when it comes to customer insights, perhaps it's not enough to do this. Don't just think outside the box – throw the whole box away.

Market segmentation is still valuable, just not as much

Yes, market segmentation is still valuable today and it's still widely employed. However, two crucial issues in our postmodern era render it less valuable than it used to be:

STRATEGISTS THINK IN TERMS OF DICHOTOMIES. CONSUMERS DON'T

Marketing strategy is largely about this or that: Male or female. Introvert or extravert. Light user or heavy user. Black or white. OK, sometimes we'll see more than two options like age groups that break into Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X and so on. But even then, we love to divide the entire world into a few manageable categories.

Still, these either/or groupings leave no room for shades of gray (much less 50 shades!). Thus, we might classify someone as a

Millennial if she was born in the year 2000, while her roommate who entered the world in 2001 would be labeled a Gen Z-er. Do we really expect to see a big difference between these two people?

As we'll see throughout this book, those convenient yet rather arbitrary groupings simply don't capture the nuanced ways we all (even marketing strategists!) define ourselves.

TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCES LARGELY ELIMINATE THE NEED TO DEAL WITH LARGE, HOMOGENEOUS MARKET SEGMENTS

Efficiency is at the heart of traditional market segmentation strategies. The idea is to identify a sizable number of customers whom we can reach in the same way. No need to develop a separate, customized message or product for each person so we can take advantage of economies of scale.

That approach made a lot of sense when we had just a few TV networks and most people read the same mass-circulation magazines. In fact, that's what broadcasting is all about. But today we live in a narrowcasting world. Although it might have seemed crazy to think of even 15–20 years ago, the fact is that marketers now have the tools at their disposal to literally work with markets of one. You can potentially track their every move online—and tailor your messages accordingly.

Markets of one

The ability to serve "markets of one" gets more finely honed every day. Now, the explosion of Big Data applications even allows the most sophisticated organizations to send you stuff before you know you want it! Those ubiquitous "cookies" they plant in our Web browser allow them to track you just about everywhere you go online, and that capability exists for mobile phones as well. And our new "guardian angels" Siri, Alexa and so on help them to stay on top of us in our kitchens, living rooms and even our bedrooms.

These tech advances (as fraught as they are ethically) get better all the time, and Artificial Intelligence gets smarter every day. Amazon is rolling out "anticipatory shipping" capabilities that

allow the e-commerce behemoth to predict your orders based upon your past orders (again, past behavior is the best predictor of future behavior) and send those items to your local warehouse where they can rest comfortably until you realize what Amazon knew all along and you place your order.[31]

My colleagues who teach Business Intelligence love to cite the classic story about the time that the retail chain Target "outed" a pregnant teenager. Way back in 2012, an analyst realized that pregnant women tend to order a cluster of items that didn't show up in their baskets until they were fairly well along, such as unscented lotion, supplements like calcium, magnesium and zinc, and extra-big bags of cotton balls. He was able to assign customers a "pregnancy prediction score" that allowed Target to identify a woman's likely due date, and then send her coupons for items she'd be likely to crave. Supposedly an indignant father accosted a Target manager because the store was sending these coupons to his innocent teenage daughter. He later had to apologize because it turns out—you guessed it—his little angel was indeed expecting.[32] That incident happened about a decade ago—imagine what data analysts can do today!

PRODUCTS OF ONE

It's not just the marketing message that we can tailor to each individual. Advances in mass customization and 3D printing are revolutionizing our ability to make something unique for each person as well.

Levi Strauss was a pioneer in mass customization. Company researchers found that 80 percent of women around the world fall into three distinct body shapes, so it's physically impossible to offer a one-size-fits-all product. The Levi's CURVE ID program employs an interactive custom fit experience to tell a customer whether she should buy a Slight Curve, Demi Curve, or Bold Curve version of the jeans.[33] And Adidas launched the first mass-produced 3D printable shoe, the Futurecraft 4D, which customizes the size to the customer's foot – perhaps traditional shoe sizes will become a thing of the past?[34]

USE A CRM!

One of my favorite admonitions to my students (and managers as well): it's far more expensive to acquire a new customer than to keep an old one.

You should think in terms of lifetime customer value, rather than in terms of discrete transactions. Follow up after the sale and continue to vigorously court your customers. No matter how much they like you today, there are a lot of other potential suitors out there just waiting for you to drop the ball. Customer relationship management (CRM) databases and strategies that "mind the store" even when you don't are crucial to keep the ball rolling.

This "markets of one" approach is at the heart of the process many marketers follow now when they adopt a CRM system. This allows them to systematically track consumers' preferences and behaviors over time to tailor the value proposition as closely as possible to each individual's unique wants and needs. CRM allows firms to talk to individual customers and to adjust elements of their marketing programs in light of how each customer reacts. The process works in a series of steps:[35]

1. Identify customers and get to know them in as much detail as possible.
2. Differentiate among these customers in terms of both their needs and their value to the company.
3. Interact with customers and find ways to improve cost efficiency and the effectiveness of the interaction.
4. Customize some aspect of the goods or services that you offer to each customer. This means treating each customer differently based on what the organization has learned about him or her through prior interactions.

CHAPTER TAKEAWAYS

- Marketing managers tend to assume they "know" their customers, but they often think about the customer they want to have rather than the one they've got.
- The labels we use to define what business we are in derive from cultural categories that may no longer be as relevant as they used to be.
- Revisit the structures you rely upon to organize your business. Your customers don't necessarily speak your "tech" language. Explore how they assign meaning to your products by doing a deep dive into tagging sites like Pinterest that give users the flexibility to provide their own labels.
- Tried-and-true consumer insights methodologies need to be complemented by other techniques that paint a more vivid picture of the buyer's lived experience.
- In a fragmented culture, it often makes sense to think in terms of markets of one rather than homogeneous market segments.
- If you look only within your familiar vertical for new product opportunities, you will miss out on the options that lie in wait between existing verticals.
- It's far more expensive to acquire a new customer than to keep an old one.

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