

The Marketing Approach

Introduction

The focus so far has been firmly on getting the right message, about the right idea, to the right people, at the right time and place. Those familiar with marketing theory will recognise a similar type of language. The emphasis is firmly on understanding the state of the market audience, those to be targeted with a social change message or policy innovation, and developing the innovation or message so that it fills their needs.

Modern marketing, strategy and business administration techniques have revolutionised business in the developing world, and they are well on the way to revolutionising politics too. The most successful campaigns and influencing strategies have a firm grip of modern marketing strategies, and the most successful think tanks understand well that the clear analysis and prioritisation of product, customer and promotion are just as central to selling an idea to a politician as they are to selling a trainer to a child.

The Marketing Revolution

Some think tanks may be uncomfortable with such language, after all they may be more concerned by social justice, academic rigour, and getting their message across. Lattimer points out that this was the way companies acted too, once upon a time:

‘Company salespeople in the first half of the century were encouraged to think of themselves in much the same way. They travelled around the country spreading the message, finding as many converts as possible for their product or brand. Quietly simply a market for the product didn’t exist. But by the fifties, even as the culture of ‘salesmanship’ reached its height, a new approach was rapidly gaining adherents. Competitive pressures had forced managers to look more carefully at what consumers really needed or wanted. And to try and develop products that met those needs. In doing so they stood the role of missionary on its head. From now on the voice of the audience was to come first. This was the marketing concept: innovation driven by the needs of the consumers, rather than the convenience of the producers...It was much easier to sell people a product they thought they needed than to push on them something they didn’t want.’ (p349)

The implications of this marketing revolution are to put the analysis of the needs and wants of the customer firmly in the driving seat. It is a conceptual leap to realise that a think tank is also producing, marketing and selling something to a customer. If the leap can be made, a wide range of analysis and strategic tools exist to help the think tank.

So what is marketing? At its heart, marketing is about meeting the needs and wants of customers. It is a business-wide function, not something that operates alone from other business activities. It is about understanding customers and finding ways to provide products or services which customers demand. There are many different definitions of marketing, including:

- The all-embracing function that links the business with customer needs and wants in order to get the right product to the right place at the right time;
- The achievement of corporate goals through meeting and exceeding customer needs

better than the competition;

- The management process that identifies, anticipates and supplies customer requirements efficiently and profitably. All of these could equally well be applied to a good communications and influencing strategy of a think tank in which the market is the policy community or audience, who 'buy' the convincing range of messages and ideas from the think tank.

Marketing Functions and the Think Tank

The table below illustrates some of the main functions associated with marketing. After thoroughly researching the market, the next step is product development. At this stage, think tanks develop the content of the research, evidence and innovation on the issues they are working on. Distribution and promotion follows (with networking, negotiating, publicising and campaigning all being important, as well as the style of selling). Pricing and sales functions are less obvious, but no less important. Pricing is the act of deciding how controversial or confrontational to make the message or demand. It equates to the political cost or price and how easy it will be for a government to accept it. Most think tanks try to produce ideas that have very low political costs, or at least as much political reward as cost. Sales – usually outside of the marketing sphere – is the end point in a business. For a think tank, this is the point at which a case is made or won. This is almost always followed by the parties sitting around the table to discuss exactly how a new policy or programme will be implemented.

Business and think tank functions compared

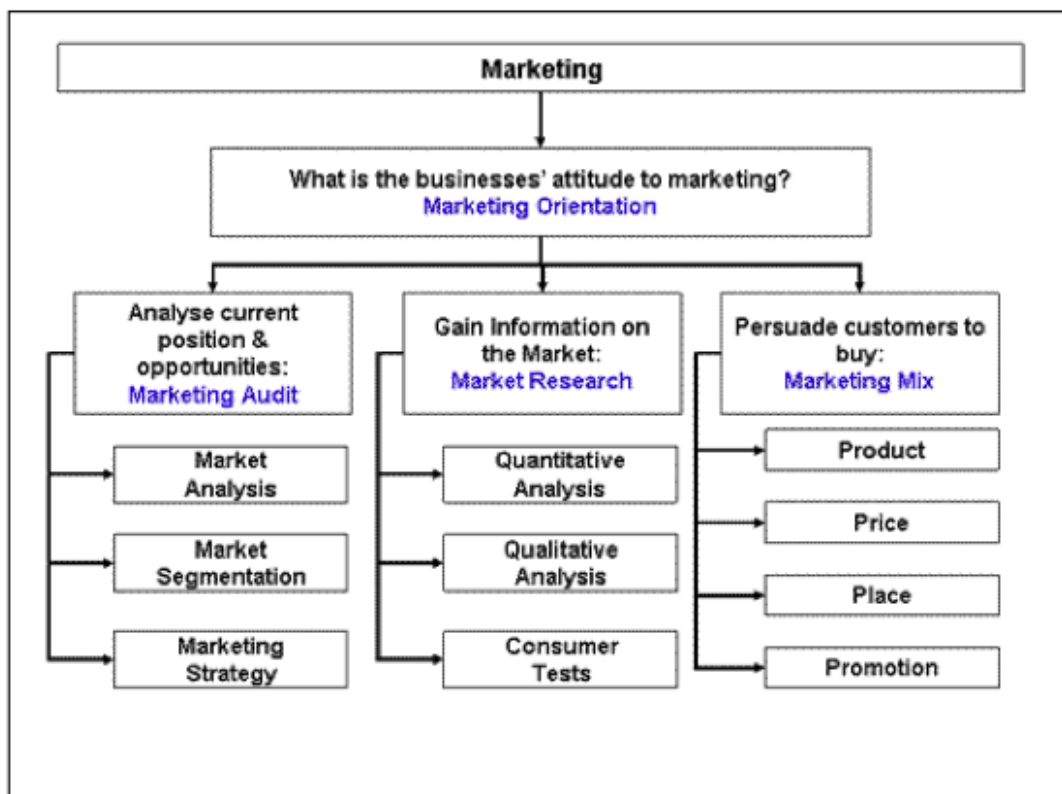
Business Function	Activities	Think Tank Function
Identifying customer/consumer needs and wants, and competition	Marketing Research	Understanding needs and wants of the policy community, and conflicting messages
Developing products to meet customer/consumer needs and wants	Production research and development	Researching and developing messages presented so relevant and timely to policy community
Deciding on the value of the product to customers	Pricing	Deciding how high to set the political cost of the message-confrontational and revolutionary or incremental
Making the product available to customer at the right time and place	Distribution	Making the message available to the audience at the right time and place
Informing customers/consumers of the existence of the product and persuading them to buy it	Promotion	Informing the audience of the message and winning them over to it

As any lobbying firm will tell you, many companies have also evolved hybrid sections of their marketing departments to deal specifically with developing and 'selling' messages to the specialist interest groups and policy communities. The 'public relations' department is geared towards shareholders, the media and the public at large, and often stretches to include a message not directly aimed at creating sales.

The 'public affairs' department tends to be geared directly towards policy circuits, and will aim to ensure a conducive policy environment (regulations, taxes, etc.) for their core product.

The figure below gives an overview of the core marketing processes of market audit (analysing and segmenting the market and developing a strategy), market research (canvassing opinions and testing products) and marketing mix (where the unique combination of product, price, place and promotion strategy are decided). Similar ideas are followed in many of the following sections and the avid marketer should take advantage of some of the excellent tools and resources available that, with some adaptation, provide a useful input to planning for the think tank issue influencing process.

Overview of Core Marketing Process



Resources

www.marketingteacher.com

www.tutor2u.com

www.mycoted.com