

# What Are they Doing? A Study of Contemporary Marketing Practice in Ireland



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## INTRODUCTION

A study was undertaken in 2001 into contemporary marketing practice in five countries. The findings were published in the *Journal of Marketing* (Coviello et al., 2002). The paper called for other academics to replicate this research in different countries so that a comprehensive and comparative study of worldwide marketing practice could emerge. To this end this paper reports the findings from an Irish study into contemporary marketing practice. The findings demonstrate the continued dominance of transactional marketing, but other marketing practices are also identified. Implications for researchers, teachers and practitioners are discussed.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review briefly considers four main themes which form the backdrop to the area of research known as the Contemporary Marketing Practice (CMP) studies. This stream of research was initiated at the University of Auckland (Brodie et al., 1997) and has since developed into a large, comparative, international study (Brookes and Palmer, 2004). The nature of this research is subsequently discussed in more detail.

## THEORY AND PRACTICE

Marketing has suffered from lack of a clear understanding of what constitutes marketing practice itself and in relation to the theoretical principles. The general thrust of the literature is twofold; marketing is struggling to respond to changes in the marketing environment (O'Driscoll, 1997; Palmer and

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Ponsonby, 2002; Piercy, 1998). Various authors provide a range of explanations and directions for these new opportunities for marketing (Brown et al., 1996; Brownlie et al., 1999; Day and Montgomery, 1999; Murray and O'Driscoll, 1996; O'Malley and Patterson, 1998; Wensley, 1995). The ability of marketing theory to respond to the contemporary needs of managerial practice is both questioned and questionable.

#### NEW RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Alternating with these discussions have been calls for more research into marketing practice. That is to say looking at what marketers actually do – the implementation of marketing (Bonoma, 1985; Brownlie and Saren, 1997; Brownlie et al., 1999; Gummesson, 1991; Hunt, 1994; Webster, 1992). What is needed is research focused on real and relevant problems and “what is going on out there” (Brownlie and Saren, 1997; Laurent and Pras, 1999), as marketing research to date has apparently had little impact on the practice of marketing (Saren, 2000). This gulf between academic theory and marketing practice is succinctly summarised by Brownlie and Saren (1995: 1077) who refer to “the high-mindedness of marketing theory and the low deeds of marketing practice”. They state that “there is a wealth of material telling us what to do and how it should be done, but rarely how it is done”. Baker (2000: 305) concurs and notes that research in marketing should confirm to us that the theory works in practice. In turn, we need to know more about how marketing is practised before we can “presume to prescribe” (Easton, 1998: S85). Theory must be informed by practice and vice versa.

#### TRANSACTIONAL AND RELATIONAL PERSPECTIVES AND PLURALISTIC APPROACH

Marketing has its origins in economics based on “concepts such as exchange, profit maximisation, utilities, specializations, the economic man and rationality” (Heeler and Chung, 2000: 63; Reinartz and Kumar, 2003). Relationship marketing in its simplest form is a progression from the dominant and often criticised, traditional, transactional 4Ps focus (Baker, 2000; Day and Montgomery, 1999; Gronroos, 1997; Gummesson, 1987, 1998; Payne, 1995; Peppers et al., 1999; Youngme, 2000). For example, Baker (2000: 303) is critical of the marketing mix or Kotlerian view of marketing, noting that, “The marketing management model is production orientated due to its preoccupation with what marketers ‘do’ to consumers. Its emphasis is essentially short-term and transactional”. Whilst these views are sometimes positioned as mutually exclusive, they may also be regarded as part of the same continuum. The concept of a continuum suggests a move away from the static marketing mix view of marketing practice, though others have reflected a more diverse (Murray et al., 2002) or pluralistic approach. An early CMP study tentatively concluded that “Firms practice more than one if not all types of

marketing” (Brodie et al., 1997: 397). Further and more recent empirical studies have shown strong confirmation of the pluralism of approaches within contemporary marketing practice (Coviello et al., 2002; Lindgreen, 2000).

### OBJECTIVES

Consequently this research seeks to explore contemporary marketing practice in a context that integrates transactional and relational marketing in order to respond more directly to the issues associated with theory, practice and implementation. The *Journal of Marketing* paper (Coviello et al., 2002) called for studies within the context of different industries and for replication of the study to test further the emerging themes. In particular the paper noted that there was no clear cut distinction between transactional and relational marketing and that rather than being mutually exclusive these types of marketing were practised concurrently. One important contribution of this study was with respect to the plural nature of marketing practice. This has helped to inform the research questions guiding this study:

- What is the relative emphasis on transactional and relational marketing practices within marketing practice in Ireland?
- How do different types of firms relate to their markets in terms of their contemporary marketing practices?

The findings from this study will be used for comparative studies with data from other countries for benchmarking purposes. In addition this confirmatory study at a national level will form the foundation for more detailed quantitative and qualitative investigations.

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### **Contemporary Marketing Practice Framework**

The marketing framework adopted for the study was the Transactional to Relational Marketing Approaches (Brodie et al., 1997; Coviello et al., 2002). This framework classifies both transactional and relational exchange on various dimensions, which can be used to judge the dominant marketing practice within companies. This framework (see Table 9.1) considers a pluralism of marketing approaches by identifying four dominant marketing perspectives, from transactional to relational (databases, interaction and network marketing). The framework is operationalised by means of a questionnaire.

This research framework was designed to study contemporary marketing practices, both transactional and relational, in Ireland across multiple firm types serving different markets with different products and services. It utilised the common analytical framework and questionnaire of the *Journal of Marketing* study discussed above.

**Table 9.1: Four Aspects of Marketing Classified by Exchange and Managerial Dimensions**

	<b>Transactional Relational</b>			
	<i>Transaction Marketing</i>	<i>Database Marketing</i>	<i>Interaction Marketing</i>	<i>Network Marketing</i>
<b>Exchange Dimensions</b>				
Purpose of exchange				
Nature of communication				
Type of contact				
Duration of exchange				
Formality in exchange				
Managerial intent				
<b>Managerial Dimension</b>				
Managerial focus				
Managerial Investment				
Managerial Level				

*Source:* Adapted from Coviello et al. (2002)

This is therefore a replication study using a standard questionnaire, modified only slightly for cultural context, of an accepted research methodology. Additional studies using the same methodology have been, or will be, conducted in New Zealand, Holland, Finland, United States, Canada, Sweden, Great Britain, Argentina, Russia and the UAE.

#### SAMPLE AND DATA COLLECTION METHOD

Replicating the Coviello et al. (2002) research design, this study involved convenience samples of managers who were provided with a self-administered structured questionnaire. These practicing managers (predominantly at middle manager level) were attending an evening degree course at Trinity College Dublin. The companies were predominantly medium to large with a range of firm types and markets served. A more detailed profile of the sample firms appears in Table 9.2 overleaf.

Though a non-random technique, the use of full-time practitioners and part-time students in this way has empirical support (Coviello et al., 2002; Neelankavil et al., 2000). Of the 45 surveys that were returned, only 39 were usable, which is adequate for the purpose of this study and compares favourably with other studies (Finland (22), Sweden (20), Canada (58), United States (76), New Zealand (132)) within the network.

**Table 9.2: Profile of Companies Surveyed**

Type of Company		Growth Rate (Last 3 years)	
Business to business service	41%	Over 11%	90%
Consumer services	39%	Over 30%	19%
FMCG/Durables	25%	<b>Size of Company</b>	
Non for profit	15%	Medium to large (Average turnover)	70m
<b>Markets Targeted</b>		Average number of employees	1,000
Consumer	24%	<b>Years of Operations</b>	
Business	46%	In business over 11 Years	70%
Both	35%	% of marketing personnel to other	20%
<b>Markets Served</b>		<b>Type of Company</b>	
Export (over 50% of revenue)	32%	Irish owned	56%
Domestic only	37%	Joint ownership	13%
Domestic and export	13%	Totally foreign owned	31%
		Division of a larger organisation	58%

The respondents were marketing professionals (90 per cent) with over half having held their position for between one and three years (52 per cent). Movement in the profession was evident with only 33 per cent stating that they had been in this position for greater than three years. Interestingly, the interchange of personnel from other departments into marketing was evident, as 67 per cent had worked in the company for longer than four years and had therefore worked in some other capacity before joining marketing. Most marketing practitioners had a degree (74 per cent) with 37 per cent having a postgraduate qualification. A very worrying figure was the lack of a marketing focus to their degrees and of even greater concern was that only 51 per cent of them had any marketing qualifications or training. The average age of marketing practitioners was relatively low with only 19 per cent older than 46.

#### SURVEY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The initial findings give interesting insight into contemporary marketing practice in Ireland. A Likert scale questionnaire (1–5) format was used and the response averages out of five are used to demonstrate the findings in this area. The twelve questions in this section can be reclassified under four main headings:

1. Marketing Activities – Transactional and Relational
2. Marketing Resources Allocation (People, Time and Money)
3. Marketing Performance
4. Communications/Contact with Customers

### **Marketing Activities – Transactional and Relational**

Question 1 explored general marketing activities. The move to relationship marketing and a focus on customer retention versus attraction can be seen to be slowly emerging, with a dual focus on attracting new customers (4.13) and retaining existing customers (4.19). There was less development of more sophisticated relationship marketing practices with fewer respondents opting for the development of co-operative relationships with customers (26 per cent) or the more networked aspects of business (21 per cent). These findings lend support to the diversity of marketing practice but show a continuing focus on the traditional practice of attracting new customers.

In contrast to the above general approach, when related to actual specifics of the orientation of their marketing planning, a focus on the more transactional aspects of marketing came to the fore. The dominant focus was on the product/brand service offering (4.61) with a focus on customers in our markets in addition to our offer, coming second at (4.39). The more relational practices of “planning to build more one-to-one relations with customers in our market(s)” or “individuals in organisations we deal with” (3.37) and the more networked approaches (3.36) were less in evidence. This could support the more aspirational nature of relationship marketing while the reality of marketing focuses on more traditional marketing practices.

### **Marketing Resources Allocation (People, Time and Money)**

Resource allocation is often evidence of the focus of activity within a department, including spend on information technology and organisation of marketing operations. There was evidence that the dominance of the marketing mix concept still prevails with the focus of resources on product, promotion, prices and distribution (or some combination of these) (4.22). There was much less of a focus on developing relationships, with an average response of 3.22 and “developing our organisation’s network relationship within our market or wider marketing system”, with an average score of 3.26. This finding reiterates the support for the contention that marketers are struggling to embrace the relational concepts and that the more traditional transaction marketing mix focus is still prevalent and utilised with relational techniques.

#### *Marketing and Information Technology*

Despite discussion of the importance of IT to marketing practice (Brady et al., 2002; Coviello et al., 2001a, 2001b) there was less evidence of dominant use of IT. For relationship marketing practices authors have ascribed a dominant role to IT and many contend that it is only through IT assimilation that marketers can successfully practice relationship marketing (Copolusky and Wolf, 1990; McKenna, 1999; Fisher et al., 2000). Investment in IT, particularly databases and communications networks, can therefore be an indicator of the move to more relational focus. There was evidence of some investments in technology, namely databases, with an average 3.27 response rate suggesting that database

technology, to improve communication with customers, was a focus of their marketing resources. There was less evidence of use of some standard ITs with websites and marketing with IT only rating 2.91 on the scale.

### *Marketing Operations*

The demise of the marketing function has been much discussed in the literature. In terms of organisational structure the marketing function, at an average of 3.65, was the main operational choice. Interestingly, the managing director or CEO played a major marketing role in many companies at an average of 3.00. There was some evidence of the concept of the part-time marketer (Gummesson, 1999) with a score of 2.71 for “non-marketers who have responsibility for marketing and other aspects of the business (for example, general manager)”. Therefore, there is some evidence of the demise or reorientation of the marketing department as discussed in the literature (Bruce et al., 1996; Piercy, 1998).

In general the findings here show that there is no dominant organisational form across companies and that, in agreement with Baker (2000), marketing practice in some way permeates throughout the organisation. For relationship marketing to succeed, this is seen as a prerequisite (Gummesson, 1997).

### **Marketing Performance**

The profit generation focus was in evidence (4.21), though “building a long-term relationship with a specific customer” (3.97) and “forming strong relationships with a number of organisations in our market or wider marketing system” (3.78) were both strongly represented and show that there are often multiple and perhaps conflicting purposes, though the profit motive dominates. These findings highlight the challenges for marketers who have to have a long-term perspective for market and relationship development but also have to achieve profit in the short term.

### *Performance Measure*

There is evidence of pressure on marketing to prove that it does create value and that it is necessary for business success (Ambler 2000, 2001; Sheth and Sisodia, 1999). Measurement of marketing performance had a predictably dominant financial focus with the highest average score for any question (4.57), though customer-based measures (for example, customer satisfaction or retention scores) (3.65) were also in evidence along with effectiveness measures (3.48), with the least popular being competitive measures such as market share (3.44). However, when this question is linked to growth rates and performance of the organisation relative to competitors there are some inconsistencies. In general, respondents suggest that they are performing better than their competitors on competitive measures (3.72) but to a lesser extent on effectiveness of marketing activities (3.23).

The dominant focus to the marketing mix was evident (3.73), though again the move to relationship marketing (3.26) and networking (3.21) also existed. There is some evidence of technology utilisation, with a 2.97 average response

for use of database tools to target and retain customers and an average of 3.16 for “using internet and other interactive technologies to create/mediate dialogue between our firm and our customers”.

### **Communications/Contact with Customers**

Analysing their choices of marketing communications, targeting a specially identified segment was the dominant choice (4.38) but mass marketing was surprisingly high at 3.34. Many of the companies focused on individual interactions (3.47) or networking (3.47) and so personal selling is utilised by many of the companies. The concept of integrated communications using a variety of communication/promotion media was in evidence. A variety of tactics were used to reach customers but reliance on mass market communications shows that traditional marketing techniques still prevail.

#### *Primary Customers*

A diverse range of communication options were utilised. The analysis showed a lack of face-to-face contact with primary customers. Two explanations suggest themselves: evidence of a focus on traditional marketing mix practices rather than customer contact or an indication of the non-customer-interfacing role of marketing, with face-to-face negotiations being the role of the sales force. Formal meetings with customers dominated (3.97), though meeting at a formal business and an informal social level was also prevalent (3.34) which could indicate the relatively small size of the Irish market. There was also evidence of a move to more impersonal communication with more interactive technological methods used for contact (3.09).

#### *Desired Contact Levels from the Customer's Perspective*

The patterns here revealed that there is a perception that customers desire ongoing one-to-one contact, which had the highest average response rate of 3.60. The option of no future personalised contact was only suggested by (1.84) which had the lowest average response rate. This indicates that companies perceive that customers want more contact but, related to the findings above, are finding it difficult to provide that contact.

### **INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND MARKETING PRACTICE**

Specific questions with respect to IT assimilation were included and the findings show that companies were medium (45 per cent) to high technology (48 per cent) organisations. The trend was for improvements in this area over the next five years. This confirms the findings in other studies (Brady et al., 2002; Desai et al., 1998) and concurs with a recent Irish study that showed that firms are encountering challenges to the introduction of a range of ITs (Ahmed and Brannick, 2002). This research confirms that the majority of companies are utilising IT to automate or reinforce the current position/practices (53 per cent) or using IT to extend or improve existing



marketing efforts (58 per cent) rather than to transform their practices. Ecommerce adoption is evident through the stages of ecommerce assimilation, which averaged 49 per cent implementation.

### DISCUSSION

This research reinforces the contention that there is a pluralism of marketing behaviour and these findings are largely consistent with the original 2002 study that suggested this research. Several interesting additional insights emerge. This work also indicates the need for developments in marketing education to reflect the pluralistic nature of marketing. It portrays businesses as utilising traditional marketing techniques, whilst also embracing relational focused practices to a lesser extent. There is also evidence of a profession which has a whole new Pandora's Box of IT applications, highlighting the need for technological capabilities within marketing. This demands a new skill from marketers, namely the understanding of IT both internally and externally. The enhanced need for technology in marketing must also form a core part of marketing education (Brady et al., 2002).

Further comparative analysis of these research findings in relation to other international replication studies is currently being pursued by the authors in order to more fully address the second research question. At the same time there is a recognised need for larger quantitative and qualitative studies in order to contribute to the current and future developments of marketing theory and to guide practice in Ireland. There is no single view of marketing practice, with a variety of different approaches, methods and theories abounding (Saren, 2000) and the challenge is for researchers to conduct further studies at a national level.

It is worth noting that a worrying statistic from the study was that over half of marketing practitioners have no marketing qualifications and this information must be of interest to the educational bodies, professional associations and government.

### CONCLUSIONS

Irish contemporary marketing practitioners utilise a range of marketing practices, applications and techniques, and rather than the demise of the transactional marketing mix this continues as a necessary component of marketing practice in tandem with relationship marketing. With the challenges this brings for practitioners, we now, more than ever, need marketing education which will prepare marketers for more diverse marketing practices which will be explained with respect to their marketing conditions, customer base, markets and other contextual factors. Marketers must be aware of the challenges but also the wide range of marketing strategies and tactics available to them as they operate in a more complex and difficult marketing environment. Theorists and researchers must study this while educators must prepare students and businesses for this myriad of challenges. This study

demonstrates the need for the further study and integration of marketing theory and practice in order to disseminate and develop leading-edge capabilities within industry.

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