

WHAT MARKETING IS (NOT)

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of the paper is to reveal details about marketing perception and how big the discrepancy is between its perception and the actual marketing definition and concept. The paper gives findings related to the perception of marketing through the eyes of the students in the field of economics and business at their early years of higher education.

Methodology – The analysis was conducted in a period of four years among a sample of bachelor level students at a faculty of economics and business not having previous higher education related to marketing. The analysis was based on a simple opened question related to the perception of the marketing conducted via online collecting the answers and in a traditional way (writing the answers on paper).

Findings – The results confirm the existing concerns related to the perception of marketing, which is mostly perceived as promotion, especially advertising, as well as sales. Following, the results revealed market research and activities related to the creation of the product as other elements connected with marketing. Distribution and price were stated at a lower level as elements connected with the marketing.

Contribution – The paper identifies a misconception of marketing that is primarily related to the fact that marketing is perceived solely through the lens of advertising and sales. Uncovering the problem of marketing positioning can provide clues to some macro-level steps that could help to better understand not only marketing itself, but also to the implementation of marketing business concept in practice.

Keywords marketing, perception, discrepancies, students, integrated marketing communication

INTRODUCTION

By observing and listening to the public opinion related to the perception of marketing, it can be noticed that marketing is mostly perceived as advertising or sales. This was the motivation for conducting a research with the aim of analyzing in more detail what was noticed and commented on in the groups of marketing experts.

Therefore, the purpose of the paper is to reveal details about the perception of marketing and the marketing business concept. Furthermore, it is about uncovering the discrepancy between the essence of marketing and its core on the one hand and the completely wrong understanding of marketing in the broad public opinion on the other.

In other words, it seems that marketing has a problem with its own positioning. Positioning implies a way in which some product (which except physical product can be service or idea, but also a business subject) is perceived, accepted based on its key characteristics and placed in the consciousness in comparison with competitors (Grbac 2005, 265). The research question therefore relates to the definition of the positioning of

marketing itself. In addition, there are two further questions that contribute to the understanding of this main question:

1. How is marketing actually perceived – which underlines the need to conduct market research and find the answer.
2. What can be done – what are the scientific findings that should be analysed so that marketing does not fall into the realm of complete misperceptions that put marketers in a completely wrong positioning “box”.

The “battle” for right and accurate marketing positioning is not an easy job being faced with obstacles from the media. Precise examples of this type of situation are those in which a series of advertising materials is broadcast and this television or radio announcement is preceded by “marketing”. In this way, marketing being in hands of non-marketing experts, started to advertise itself as something what it is not, putting wide public of laypeople into the trap of complete misunderstanding marketing. Hand in hand with this misperception goes the perception of advertising agencies as “marketing” agencies.

Therewith, the problems detected are related to the following groups:

1. Wrong advertising announcements (and wrong advertising of term “marketing”).
2. Misperception of term marketing agencies.
3. Misperception among public (even people at the faculties of economics and business) that marketing relates exclusively to promotional activities, precisely advertising.

At the end of the introductory part, it is important to stress following. During the last decades a lot of changes have occurred within the field of marketing. They mostly relate to technological progress. First, marketing going digital gave possibilities of very precise segmentation of market as well as possibilities of very precise market analysis and product adaption (Kannan and Li 2017). Furthermore, within market research, new technologies provided insight gathered in a way that could not be imagined before (e.g. functional magnetic resonance imaging applied in the field of market research), giving precise insights in understanding customer’s “black box” (Camerer, Loewenstein and Prelec 2004). Even though the environment has changed, the core of the marketing and marketing business concept, having customer needs and wants in its focus stood the same. Understanding this presents the key to long-term success and win-win situations between buyers and sellers at the market. As a starting point for this research, the students of a faculty of economics and business were first analyzed.

The topics and problems addressed in the introduction are analyzed in more detail in the following part, which deals with the theoretical background. Onwards, the empirical part presents methodology and research results, and the paper ends with concluding remarks.

1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

There are different definitions of the marketing term. Based on the literature review the following definitions are stressed and disclosed.

Looking back at marketing classics, Dibb et al. from 1995 (p. 4) cite UK Chartered Institute of Marketing describing marketing as: “the management process responsible for identifying, anticipating and satisfying customer requirements profitably”. Another definition disclosed at by Dibb et al. (1995, 4) relates to the one from AMA describing marketing as “the process of planning and implementing the creation of ideas, goods and services, determining their prices, promotion and distribution in order to achieve an exchange that will satisfy the goals of individuals and organizations”. Finally, Dibb et al. (1995, 5) conclude that “marketing consists of the activities of individuals and organizations that enable and accelerate exchange in a dynamic environment through the creation, distribution, promotion, and defining prices of goods, services, and ideas”.

During years the definition was changing so Solomon et al. (2013, 9) focused again on UK Chartered Institute of Marketing definition of marketing from 2007 stating that marketing implies “strategic business function that creates value by stimulating, facilitation and fulfilling customer demand. It does this by building brands, nurturing innovation, developing relationships, creating good customer service and communicating benefits. With a customer-centric view, marketing brings positive return on investment, satisfies shareholders and stakeholders from business and the community, and contributes to positive behavioural change and a sustainable business future.”

Focus on customer-centric view stress as well Grbac (2014, 31), according to who marketing can be defined as: “the process of creating and exchanging value between organizations and consumers”, furthermore explaining that marketing, theory and practice, in its focus has customer needs and wants based on which the value for them (customers) will be created. As well, Kotler at al. (2013, 5) emphasize the importance of value in defining marketing as “a process by which companies create value for customers and build strong customer relationships to capture value from customers in return.”

Today, on the AMA (2025) web pages it can be read that: “Marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large”.

Grbac even in 2005 (p. 25) states key elements for successful marketing: creating and providing value to the customer and exchange as the core element of marketing activities, as well as consumer-centric orientation – and although time and factors defining environment are changing, those directions will always stay the same in order to assure achieving a win-win situation and long-term loyalty (Breugelmans et al. 2015).

It should also be emphasized that customers are the focus of marketing orientation. Schiffman and Kanuk (2004, 5) explain this as follows. The main assumption underlying the marketing business concept is that a company must identify the needs and wants of specific target markets and offer more satisfactory solutions than its competitors in order to achieve successful results. The marketing concept is based on the premise that the supplier should make what can be sold, rather than trying to sell what it has made. While the sales concept focuses on the needs of the seller, the marketing concept focuses on the needs of the buyer. With the purpose of identifying unmet consumer needs and wants,

business subjects should conduct marketing research. In doing so, they discovered that consumers are highly complex individuals driven by a variety of psychological and social needs (sometimes also far away from their existential needs). They discovered that the needs and priorities of different consumer segments differ in a large scale and that in order to develop new products and marketing strategies that satisfy consumers, it is necessary to study consumers and their consumption behavior.

Furthermore, what is explained earlier, the environment has changed, but the core and nature of marketing remains the same. Yet in 1994 Skinner (p. 15) explains that: “the marketing concept recognizes that organizations have goals. In some instances, these goals may be profit-oriented; in others, they may be aimed at furthering a social cause. In any case, firms that adopt the marketing concept attempt to achieve their own goals by satisfying the needs of customers through coordinated organizational levels”. It is important to stress here that the product is perceived much broader than just a physical object, having its tangible and intangible elements as well as primary and auxiliary dimensions (Grbac 2014, 121). Hence, perception of a product can be broadened much further from a physical object, even towards non-profit segments and social marketing dimension (AMPN 2025). Thus, even education itself can be viewed through the lens of the marketing business concept (Lariccia et al. 2025, WE-COLLAB 2025).

Furthermore, based on analyzing the marketing approach it can be divided and explained through two main parts. The first one refers to is strategical decision making based on defined gaps on the market uncovered by market research – and based on which segmentation and positioning are further defined. The second one is a tactical part through which strategic ideas are implemented into practice, mostly with its operationalization through marketing mix elements.

Stated above can be seen as well from the Kotler et al. (2013, 5) depicting a simple model of the marketing process. First of all, it starts from understanding the market – noticing customer needs and wants and ends with building profitable relationships and creating customer delight based on providing explicit value for customers representing a source for creating profit and customer equity. Between those starting and ending points of the process, there are two more important points. The first one is designing a customer driven marketing strategy followed by constructing an integrated marketing program that delivers superior value. Hence, the process is based on those two pillars: a strategical and tactical one.

Hence, related to the strategy, it can be stated that marketing strategy is a basic pattern of an organization's current and planned objectives, resource deployment and interactions with markets, competitors and other environmental factors (Hollensen 2010, 2). As well, when formulating a marketing strategy, Pavlek (2008, 49) emphasize that it is important to determine “who will be served, who will be sold to and with whom long-term relationships will be created.” Furthermore, describes marketing as a highly interactive process to create value for consumers. In this process, one communicates with a selected or targeted group, with segments whose needs and desires must be well and deeply understood. From this, the offer for each group is developed, emphasizing the

benefits and advantages over the competitors, not forgetting creating connections in an emotional sense, as well.

Within the tactics, marketing mix should be analyzed as a tool for implementing strategic ideas within the practice. Hence, the basic marketing mix includes product, price, place and promotion (Hollensen 2010, 8). Relating to the problem analyzed within this paper it should be stressed that promotion is only one part ($\frac{1}{4}$) of marketing mix. Furthermore, advertising, often mismatches and equalized with marketing is again $\frac{1}{4}$ of complete promotional mix, also called integrated marketing communication (IMC) including advertising, personal selling, sales promotion, public relations (and publicity) (Grbac 2014, 231). Furthermore, Pavlek (2008, 50) emphasizes that marketing is multifunctional discipline in scientific terms and practical application. On the one hand, its systematicity refers to the formation of models, analysis, market research and phases of the marketing process, and on the other, its creativity refers to the formation of strategies, creation of ideas, products, packaging design, communication solutions and finding new ways to reach consumers.

As far as future trends in marketing are concerned, according to the Kozlenkova et al. (2025), there are four topics that are reshaping marketing: virtual and avatar marketing, AI in marketing, crowdsourcing the marketing function, and privacy and marketing. Nevertheless, all these new trends are still about the basic principles of marketing, even if the environment has changed. But the analysis of customer needs and wants as well as the search for ways to fulfill them remain the same.

Based on all above mentioned, analyzing all the aspects of the theory of the marketing basics, it can be concluded that the backbone of the marketing concept consists of the following elements:

1. Understanding customers' needs and wants – market discrepancies
2. Market research providing tools for deeper and more precise analysis of the market (consumers)
3. Understanding market segmentation, defining target market(s) and strategically defining positioning at the market
4. Defining the product characteristics
5. Defining the price characteristics
6. Defining the distribution characteristics
7. Defining the integrated marketing communication characteristics.

The first three elements refer to the strategical approach and following four marketing mix elements refer to the tactics relating to strategy implementation into practice. Based on the elaboration of the theoretical part, empirical part is disclosed as follows.

3. DISCLOSURE OF THE MARKETING PERCEPTION

3.1. Research methodology

In order to get the answers on the research question focused on perception of the “marketing”, the question “How would you define marketing?” was asked. The sample

was made of students at the bachelor level at a Faculty of Economics and Business. In the academic year 2019/2020 students, participants filled their answers at the paper having completely anonymous approach, and in the academic years 2020/2021, 2023/2024, and 2024/2025 students filled the questionnaire within Moodle platform meaning that their answers can be connected with their names. Anyhow, students did not feel pressure that they have to give some precise definition (such as at exams) as the question was asked at the introductory class of the Marketing course, before any explanations and definitions about marketing were given. Hence, they could feel free to express their own opinion. The answers were collected in March (in the beginning of the semester) in already mentioned years: 2020, 2021, 2024, and 2025. The research in 2020 was conducted among full time students and research in 2021, 2024, and 2025 was conducted among full time and part time students. The total number of participants through the years was as follows. In 2020 = 185 participants, in 2021 = 141 participants, in 2024 = 77 participants, and in 2025 = 75 participants. In total, the answers are gathered from 478 participants.

All the answers entered the base from which further analysis was conducted. Analysis was aimed at two directions. First, the focus was aimed at searching for the key marketing terms depicted above within the theoretical part. The second part of the research was aimed at all other terms not being in line with key marketing terms, but being close or completely opposite. The framework for defining the key elements for the analysis is explained below (together with some typical examples in connection with the coding of the answers):

1. Discrepancies – relating to understanding market discrepancies but as well unsatisfied needs and wants of the consumers, presenting a basis of marketing concept of business approach (the analysis included answers such as: understanding the needs and wants of customers, meeting customer needs and wants, recognizing what people want)
2. Market research – key point of understanding market (customers) and bases for adapting marketing mix elements (the analysis included answers such as: market research, research process, study of consumer preferences, analyzing previous data and user comments, studying customer behavior)
3. Target market – understanding that the combination of marketing mix elements will be tailored specifically for a specific group of people having same/similar characteristics (the analysis included answers such as: target market, reaching the target group, reaching the "right people")
4. Product – being the center of the marketing mix, providing a specific value to the customer (the analysis included answers such as: creation, launching, development and improvement of products, design, creation of ideas, creation of (added) value for the customer)
5. Price – defining the price as an element of marketing mix (the analysis included answers such as: price, defining prices)
6. Distribution – defining the distribution channels as an element of marketing mix (the analysis included answers such as: place, distribution, distribution of products, location)
7. Integrated marketing communication (IMC) – combining all promotional mix elements (advertising, personal selling, sales promotion, and public relations) (the

analysis included answers such as: promotion, advertising, product presentation, providing information about the product, public relations, billboards, advertising on social networks/websites)

8. Other – all other interpretations of marketing: (a) broader from strict marketing defining terms/auxiliary elements connected with marketing or (b) completely not being in line with marketing definition (the analysis included answers such as: sales, increase in sales, finding out how to sell a product/service, marketing “tricks”, connecting sellers and buyers, exchange, social networks, (contracts with) influencers, creativity, psychology, image and reputation of the company, business strategy, function in the organization, profit).

Furthermore, from the “Other” category, answers equalizing marketing with the sales were excluded and “sales” represents an additionally added category due to the fact that it had very high frequency of its repetition within the students’ answers. As explained in the theoretical part, sales business concept represents a completely different philosophy and strategy than the marketing business concept. By analyzing the results, sales represented a completely separated category.

After analyzing each academic year separately, the tables were put together in order to gather the results in total.

3.2. Research results

The answers analyzed (2020, 2021, 2024, 2025) provided the following results depicted in Graph 1, showing the frequency of how many times an element appears within participants’ definition of marketing. The first seven elements, explained within methodology (market discrepancies, market research, target market, product, price, distribution, IMC), are derived from the marketing definition and they were used for analysis. It has to be emphasized that sales, was not initially planned to be a part that will be separately analyzed as it was within “other” category. Since revealing high amount of the answers including sales as the element of the marketing definition in perception of the participants, “sales” was separated and shown within graph as well.

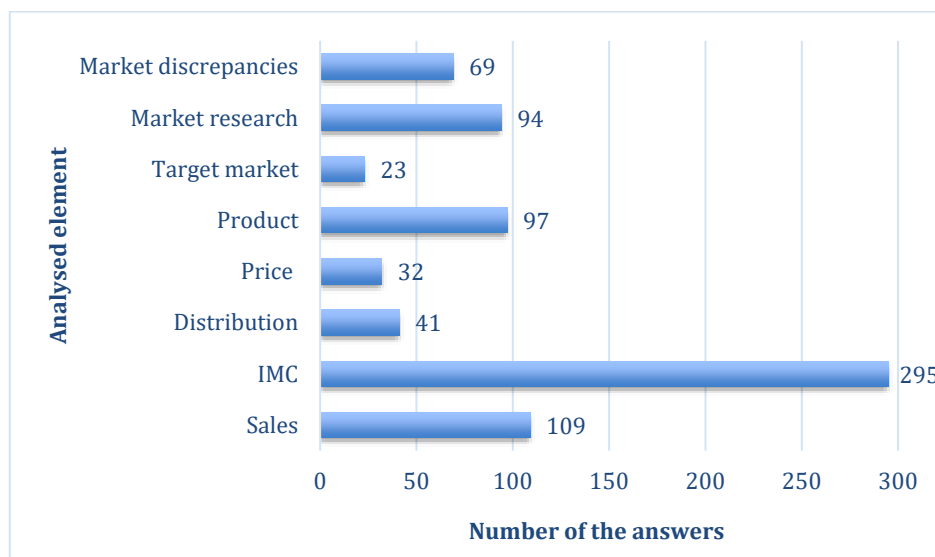
Based on all answers analyzed it can be confirmed that within participants’ answers defining marketing, most of the elements were in a connection with IMC (frequency of IMC as a part of marketing definition = 109). This result confirms that term marketing is mostly positioned as promotion. Going a step further it can be revealed that from the answers connecting marketing with the promotion, most of them (103/295) emphasized advertising.

IMC is followed by sales (frequency of sales as the element of marketing definition, stated by participants = 109) which is often in broader public connected with the marketing, mismatching sales and marketing business concept.

Excluding IMC, among other three elements of 4Ps (product/price/distribution), the product is the one mostly perceived in the connection with marketing (frequency of

product as the element of marketing definition = 97). Furthermore, the answers were related to product design, launching, but also about creating value for customers. Interestingly, price as the element of the marketing definition is stated less times (frequency = 32) than distribution (frequency = 41).

Graph 1: Frequency of elements within students' marketing definition



Source: Research results

A lot of answers are in connection with being aware of the importance of the market research (frequency of market research as the element of marketing definition = 94) as well as understanding market discrepancies (frequency of discrepancies as the element of marketing definition = 69) and the fact that marketing arises from the unsatisfied and detected consumer needs and wants.

Importance of target market (frequency of target market as the element of marketing definition = 23) was depicted from the participants answers, but the situation was different for importance of positioning (being stressed in just 3 answers).

Furthermore, some of the answers were related to brand. Also, the connection of marketing and psychology was stressed, as well as emphasizing the importance of creativity for marketing. As well, many answers within the "other" category were given describing marketing as a connection between sellers and buyers, as well as making profit. Furthermore, special attention was aimed at social networks and influencers, but opposite form expectations, there were not many answers connecting marketing with those elements.

Table 1 shows the students' responses over the four-year period at the introductory Marketing classes.

Table 1: Frequency of connecting specific elements with marketing definition

Academic year / Element analysed	2019/2020	2020/2021	2023/2024	2024/2025
Market discrepancies	21	35	7	6
Market research	35	33	10	16
Target market	4	8	6	5
Product	43	37	9	8
Price	14	10	5	3
Distribution	18	11	6	6
IMC	112	75	58	50
Sales	40	24	22	23
Other	67	67	38	40

Source: Research results

Overall, in a term of analyzing marketing concept as a “product” with its primary and auxiliary features (Grbac, 2014, 121), with cleared results and considering only those elements that really are in a connection with marketing, and based on the theory and empirical analysis, Figure 1 is summarized.

Figure 1: Marketing as a “product” – primary and auxiliary features



Source: Research results

Figure 1 depicts marketing in such a way that its elements can be understood by combining elements from theoretical marketing definitions and participants' perceptions

of marketing. Based on the theoretical and empirical part mentioned above, the core/primary elements of marketing have been summarized, which include both strategic (market discrepancies, market research, target market and positioning) and tactical (product, price, distribution and integrated marketing communication) elements. Analyzing marketing through the lens of the “product” that should be well positioned in the market, its auxiliary part refers to the awareness of its role in: connecting sellers and buyers, generating profit, creating a brand and being supported by creative and interdisciplinary approach (e.g. through connections with knowledge from psychology).

Furthermore, based on the theoretical and empirical analysis, the conclusion is derived.

CONCLUSION

The paper provides an insight into the perception of marketing. The findings highlight the existing gap in the perception of marketing, which equates it exclusively with promotion – advertising and selling. Sales business concept with strong accent explicitly on advertising is not a key for long-term success. This approach should be separated from the marketing business concept. Correcting this path is seen as a long-term idea and is not easy to accomplish. The goal of raising awareness and understanding of the actual marketing concept may never be fully achieved, but there are some approaches that can help with marketing positioning. The contribution is not only theoretical but understanding the real marketing nature as well as the market business concept gives practitioners the opportunity to succeed at business and to achieve win-win situations through assuring loyalty of their customers.

The scientific contribution relates to providing a clear picture of marketing terms as well as marketing business concept not being mismatched with other ones. By summarizing a clear marketing definition from much earlier periods going back at least 5 decades to today, the core remains the same even though the environment has changed. Hence, the core of the consumer-centric approach has remained the same. The practical implications are in line with realizing that advertising is only one part, the top of the iceberg of the entire integrated marketing communication strategy. Furthermore, the core values of marketing lie in market research, recognizing discrepancies and bridging gaps in the market. The consumer-centric orientation should be the focus and not be misunderstood with the advertise-centric approach (e.g. managers who push advertising and social media campaigns without having a clear picture of segmentation, choosing the right target market and at the same time thinking that this is “marketing”).

Subsequently, education plays an important role. The possibilities of information dissemination should be utilized. Specifically, information intended for the general public (e.g. also in the form of infographics) can be disseminated via the communication channels of associations at global or national level. Some examples are the European Marketing Academy (EMAC 2025) or the Croatian Marketing Association (CROMAR 2025), but also specialized organizations at the local level, such as agencies specialized in specific areas like electronic media (AEM 2025) or public relations (HUOJ 2025). In addition, it could be helpful to organize special seminars and workshops. Television or

radio programs in which short interviews with the experts are broadcast could also be helpful to raise awareness among the general public about the aspects of marketing, including consumer rights, as well. At the educational level, it could be helpful to organize guest lecturers at the high school and university level.

All mentioned above could have an important role that helps "marketing" to position itself correctly in the public consciousness. As well, it could have an important role for providing knowledge to the general public, educating and warning about false approaches that "sell" what marketing is not. Although this is difficult, especially in today's world saturated with various misinterpretations, foundations have to be set to define what is what.

The limitation of the study lies in the narrow sample, as the study is based on the responses of respondents from a single institution and a specific field of study. These students represented the interesting group to collect the answers related to their interest in a business field (and marketing) based on their preferences (economics and business), but at the same time did not yet have a high level of knowledge about marketing. This fact brings research into a specific target niche, but at the same time represents a limitation of research.

Nonetheless, these limitations point the way for further research. Further research could include a sample of students from other institutions and other interests. In addition, the sample could be expanded to include different age groups, e.g. from high school students to people who are already retired, in order to obtain a larger analysis. An important part of the definition of scope for the further studies relates to people with different educational backgrounds and different areas of interest, as knowledge about marketing will also vary here.

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