

Service-informed marketing reform

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to develop an alternative perspective on marketing informed by service scholarship to resolve marketing’s challenges as a discipline and practice.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper is conceptual and builds on the ongoing debate regarding marketing’s challenges and on service research to develop a new alternative marketing perspective and model, which could contribute to reforming marketing.

Findings – An analysis of the current understanding of marketing showed that the discipline’s myopic focus on activities, which disregards what marketing is as a phenomenon, is the primary reason for the prevailing problems and failure to reform marketing. Based on research into service logic (SL), the paper demonstrates that a higher level view of service can be characterized as the provision of help to the users of goods and services to ensure that these goods and services deliver meaningful assistance in their lives and work. This suggests that the ultimate objective for marketing is to make firms meaningful to the users of their goods and services.

Research limitations/implications – To the best of the author’s knowledge, since this paper is the first to conceptually develop a perspective on marketing and a corresponding model informed by service scholarship, more conceptual and empirical research is necessary. Developing the new meaningfulness-based perspective and model for marketing brings a new approach to the process of resolving marketing’s current troubled situation.

Practical implications – The meaningfulness approach to marketing enables customer-centered marketing strategies to be implemented. Such strategies include both demand-stimulating and demand-satisfying programs.

Originality/value – To the best of the author’s knowledge, this paper is the first to examine marketing’s troubled situation from a service research and SL perspective.

Keywords Conceptual, Service logic, Meaningfulness

Paper type Conceptual paper

“Marketing is in the midst of a dysfunctional myopic drift.”

(Cronin and Nagel, 2024, p. 2)

It is well documented that marketing is losing credibility both as an academic discipline and business practice [1]. Marketing research has become geared toward minor topics and methods at the expense of larger strategic issues. In practice, marketing has become overly devoted to tactical issues and is less respected at board level and in strategic decision-making. As a result, there is a growing risk that marketing is less beneficial to customers and serves them less effectively (Sheh and Sisodia, 2005; Wilkie and Moore, 2003). The introductory quote is from Cronin and Nagel’s (2024) discussion of marketing’s troubled trajectory in view of the debate that has continued for several years in scholarly marketing journals without any significant results as to a reform of the discipline. In his comprehensive analysis of marketing’s current challenges, Hunt (2020) concluded that “(marketing has) evolved to its current troubled state” (p. 30). Noting that other disciplines, such as supply chain management, logistics and information systems, increasingly occupy marketing’s domain, Clark *et al.* (2024) urged marketing scholars to urgently find ways to

reform the discipline. They argued that “the longer these kinds of domain poaching continue, the more normalized a lack of indigenous marketing theory will become, relegating and subsuming our discipline into non-marketing business function areas” (Clark *et al.*, 2024).

Cronin and Nagel (2024) called for scholarly research with the leadership of service researchers to explore how marketing can be reformed and reinstated as a respected academic discipline and business practice. In a comparison between the marketing of goods and services, I argued that mainstream goods-based marketing is an extreme case in which customer contact is stripped of most content other than the physical product (Grönroos, 2006). I concluded that marketing needs to consider the increasing content of customer interfaces and be developed to a new level “where service marketing is the norm” (p. 329).

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As a response to the call for the reform of marketing based on scholarly leadership from the service research field, the purpose of the present article is, first, to analyze how, informed by service research, marketing can be reformed to regain its credibility. Second, the purpose is to introduce a dynamic model of marketing based on an alternative perspective, according to which marketing is primarily aimed at creating meaningfulness for its many stakeholders. In response to Cronin and Nagel's (2024) criticism of the path marketing research has followed by overly focusing on the social sciences and consumer behavior, the present article takes two important stances:

- 1 Despite borrowing from many social sciences, marketing is basically an economic discipline.
- 2 Regardless of the fact that it is critical that marketing decisions are based on the customers' purchasing and consumption behaviors, marketing is primarily a management issue.

Naturally, marketing should be based on a customer-centered worldview. Finally, as demonstrated by Cronin's (2022) triadic view of exchange, customers form only one of three major stakeholder groups to be served by marketing, the others being the provider and society.

The article is structured as follows: In the next section, the challenges to marketing are discussed and the underlying foundational assumptions of the discipline analyzed. Then, service as a phenomenon is addressed, which leads to the suggestion that on this higher order level, service can be defined as the provision of help to users. Based on this view of service, an alternative perspective to marketing is developed. I suggest that marketing as a phenomenon could be described as the process of making organizations and subsequently their offerings meaningful to users of their offerings. Next, I analyze the five "classic" service marketing models to determine how products that must be developed to extend existing offering could be marketed. A dynamic model of marketing based on the meaningfulness perspective is then introduced. Finally, the marketing-as-meaningfulness perspective and some of its major implications are discussed.

Marketing's challenges

To explore what marketing informed by service could be, it is essential to first ask the questions that have never been addressed in the ongoing discussions of how to reform marketing: "What is marketing?" and "What is meant by marketing?" When reading articles about the challenges to marketing, it seems as if the authors inherently agree that what is given the label "marketing" *is marketing*. Consequently, what is not called this *is not marketing*. It appears to be taken for granted that there is a common understanding of what marketing is. Furthermore, and more worryingly, this assumed understanding is apparently considered correct without the need for debate. The expression "myopic drift" in the introductory quote reflects this situation succinctly.

Despite the numerous important and interesting viewpoints and comments that have been presented and the criticisms of the prevailing views of marketing that have been voiced, no real suggestions about how to reform marketing or new perspectives are present in the debate. Some concepts, such as service-dominant logic (SDL) and resource-based theory, have been

explored as the new bases of a grand theory of marketing (Parvatiyar and Sheth, 2021; Hunt *et al.*, 2022) but with limited results. It is seemingly difficult to find new perspectives. The reason for this may be that the question "What is marketing?" is not asked, and the topic of what marketing really means is not debated. This appears to be the straitjacket reinforcing the "myopic drift" that hinders researchers from both locating the fundamental questions—which is perhaps the main reason for marketing's predicament—and searching for something fundamentally new.

Due to the lack of discussion on what marketing is, I conducted a study with the aim of examining the underlying, unarticulated assumptions guiding marketing theory and practice. *Problematizing* a theory, model or concept is a method used to reflect on and reveal the implicit or weakly articulated underlying assumptions of an entity. Despite being foundational to the entity, such assumptions often go unobserved and are taken for granted. Problematizing an entity allows researchers to examine such hidden assumptions to determine what impact they have on the understanding and practice of the entity. This also allows for an exploration of alternative assumptions, which in turn, may provide new perspectives on the entity (Alvesson and Sköldböck, 2009; Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011). As Davis (1971) observed, "interesting theories are those which deny certain assumptions of their audience" (p. 1). Bacharach (1989) asserted that to be appropriately applied and tested, "(the entity's) implicit assumptions must be understood" (p. 498). By challenging assumptions, new avenues for theoretical development and empirical studies can be opened (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013).

For such problematization of marketing, the current definition of marketing introduced in 2007 and revalidated in 2023 by the American Marketing Association (AMA) was chosen as a reference to the entity marketing (American Marketing Association, 2023) [2]. The problematization process and an analysis of the revealed underlying assumptions as well as their implications are presented in detail in Grönroos (2023; summarized in Table 1 included). As a summary, the following marketing foci were elucidated: Marketing is primarily considered activities organized in a given structure, exclusively the responsibility of marketing specialists, one-sidedly directed toward customers as objects, overwhelmingly geared toward demand stimulation and promise making, and based on value for customers and other stakeholders that is created by the provider. Thus, marketing is based on an inside-out worldview and corresponding management approach. What marketing should achieve for customers and other stakeholders is not included beyond the self-evident notion that the exchanged goods and services should have value (or, as in the 1985 definition, create satisfaction). Finally, marketing has limited control over the product (goods, services, information, or other resources), and to a growing extent, other elements in addition to the product are required by users and influence their consumption experiences and buying behaviors. Marketing has thus rapidly lost control over demand satisfying and the supply side of the discipline and its practice (Wilkie and Moore, 2003). As noted, this part of marketing has been taken over by, for example, supply chain management (Key *et al.*, 2020), production and operations management (Wierenga,

2021) and IT (Clark *et al.*, 2024). This has likely been detrimental to the marketing effect of these functions. This observation is supported by Brown's (2005) study of service enterprise executives, in which:

[...] notably, none of the executives mentioned marketing as being responsible for the customers. [...] the keeping of promises and building customer loyalty is typically considered the responsibility of others in the enterprise (Brown, 2005, p. 3).

However, as discussed in Key *et al.* (2020), marketing needs to embrace the whole marketing system by integrating the supply side with demand stimulation.

In conclusion, the problematization of marketing's underlying assumptions demonstrates that marketing's myopic focus on activities have led to other underlying assumptions and can therefore be considered the root cause of marketing's quandary (Grönroos, 2023). Most critically, the current marketing thinking neglects to articulate or even ponder what marketing on a higher order level as a phenomenon might be; that is, what is the meaning of marketing such that something worthwhile is achieved for the involved stakeholders? To put this bluntly, marketing currently focuses on doing things *without a clearly defined and articulated understanding of what the purpose of such activities is* beyond exchanging offerings that have value or satisfying needs.

What is service?

In the preface of his seminal book on service marketing, Rathmell (1974) noted that:

[...] as one attempts to integrate marketing terms, concepts, and practices with firms, institutions, and professions having their own traditions, customs, and practices which are quite foreign to conventional marketing [...] the link appears awkward and even improper (p. vii).

He also emphasized another fundamental challenge:

In fact, [...] in place of the one interface between buyers and sellers of goods marketing, there are two interactions between the buyer and seller of services—*marketing and production* (p. 6; *emphasis added*).

Here, marketing refers to conventional marketing activities and service production to the process of service provision and delivery. Due to the existence of an additional interface in service organizations, innovative developments and changes in how services are marketed demand intimate interactions between those who market and those who produce the service (Rathmell, 1974, p. 6).

Traditionally, services [3] have been considered a category of products that contrast with goods. They are described as processes and through characteristics such as inseparability, heterogeneity, interactivity and perishability, as studied, for example, in Zeithaml *et al.* (1985). Studies of service as logic suggests that goods and services are distribution mechanisms for service (singular) (Vargo and Lusch, 2008). Gummesson (1995) emphasized that both goods and services are processed by customers as resources to create a service that renders value. Thus, a focus on *service as a phenomenon* emerged. In the SDL research stream, service was first described as the application of specialized skills and knowledge on resources for the benefit of users and providers (Vargo and Lusch, 2008) and, more recently, as “the process of an actor using its resources for another's benefit” (Vargo *et al.*, 2023). However, this method of defining service does not indicate what should be achieved

through service beyond the self-evident assertion that it should be beneficial. From a marketing perspective, these definitions express an inside-out worldview, are provider-centric and cannot be utilized as a basis for the development of a new marketing perspective.

The alternative service logic (SL) research stream (e.g. Grönroos and Gummerus, 2014; see the comparison between SL and SDL included), which is based on a managerial approach, takes an outside-in view to create a user-centric definition of service as a phenomenon. The expectations of customers are utilized as a starting point. To cope with their life processes (and organizations with their work processes; about life and work processes, see Storbacka and Moser, 2020), customers have everyday processes to manage (“jobs to be done”; Christensen *et al.*, 2016). To do so, they can be expected to look for institutions that are capable and willing to assist with their endeavors to handle their processes in ways that they consider valuable; in other words, they expect to obtain resources they can use to create service that enables them to manage their tasks and lives such that value is rendered. In his philosophical language game, Wittgenstein (1953) suggested that to signify an entity, in this case “service,” a word or expression that has as a distinct a meaning as possible should be chosen. Because they are open to less interpretation, verbs are preferred over nouns. In this vein, the simplest, most distinct and straightforward expression to use for what enables users to manage their tasks and life is “to help” or “to provide help.” Thus, service can be defined as “to *help* someone” to ensure that something is enabled for the users of offerings (goods or services)” (Grönroos, 2024, p. 350; *emphasis in the original*). For providers, the purpose of providing goods or services or any kind of resource is *to provide help to users* (Grönroos, 2019, 2024). This help should benefit customers (and other types of users) and providers alike. In addition, it should contribute to serving society.

This definition of service is inclusive. As resources are distribution mechanisms for service, helping users is facilitated through the provision of resources, such as goods, services or any other type of resource required. By lifting the perspective, the gap between services and goods disappears. It becomes self-evident that distinguishing between different kinds of resources is counterproductive. Erasing the border between goods and services emphasizes the need for service scholarship to be involved in the reform of marketing.

A service-informed perspective on marketing

The analysis of the underlying assumptions of marketing and their implications demonstrated that to be able to reform marketing, the dominating focus on activities must be replaced with a higher order approach (Grönroos, 2023). It would appear natural to focus on what marketing *is* and what it can achieve for its stakeholders instead of focusing on what marketing *does*. In other words, what is marketing as a *phenomenon*? In the previous section, it was established that on a higher order level, as a phenomenon, service is to provide help to users such as customers and other stakeholders. Customers can be expected to seek help that is meaningful to them. From a marketing standpoint, an organization should strive to provide help in a way that it makes a significantly *meaningful* impact on users. Meaningfulness relates to the importance a person

ascribes to solutions such as goods or services and not only how they understand them (Schauman, 2022). When offerings are considered meaningful, they represent help that makes sense and thus has meaning in the user's life (Rosso *et al.*, 2010; pp. 94–95). By being meaningful, goods and services provide purpose and coherence, that is, they make the person's world comprehensible and create a sense of belonging to something worthwhile (Martela and Steger, 2016):

In a marketing context, meaningfulness can be described as being relevant and purposeful in customers' lives, such that they are enabled to manage their individual life or organizational work processes in a way that is valuable to them (Grönroos, 2023, p. 7; emphasis in the original).

Consequently, marketing should engage with its customers' lives or work processes in a meaningful way to attract them to the goods and services on offer. As this brings the customer to the forefront, it allows marketing to become outside-in focused and break its current myopic stance.

It is crucial to emphasize that meaningfulness is not the same as value or exchange. According to SL, in contrast to the traditional approach of value, value for customers is created as use value by the customers during consumption (Grönroos and Gummerus, 2014), a view postulated already in Aristotle's value theory (Gordon, 1964) [4]. In the event of successful marketing as meaningful, this will first lead to acceptance of the proposed offering of goods, services or other resources. This is a prerequisite for exchange. Exchange, in turn, facilitates value creation, which occurs when the offering provided is used. Unless the offering is considered meaningful, exchange cannot occur, and value cannot be created. Given that the offering functions satisfactorily, desired use value is established, and the relationship with the provider will likely continue. Thus, meaningfulness, exchange and value are related but differing concepts. Likewise, it should be noted that despite the significant role of service for marketing, service and marketing are not the same. Service provides a customer-focused perspective; marketing's role is to build on this perspective.

Marketing as meaningfulness

Based on the discussion of meaningfulness, marketing as a phenomenon can be defined as “*the process by which an organization is made meaningful to the users of its offerings*” (Grönroos, 2023, p. 6; emphasis in the original). Making a firm and its goods and services meaningful to customers creates attraction, leads to acceptance and helps avoid the rejection of what is offered. Depending on a user's needs and expectations and the category of goods and services offered, differing levels or depths of meaningfulness may be necessary. The level of meaningfulness required to generate attraction among users can therefore be expected to vary between customers and the types of products (goods, services, information, etc.). Consequently, the level of meaningfulness that needs to be achieved is contextual. As more than one stakeholder may be involved, conflicts can occur between them, and these must be settled. Wine and spirits form cases in which such conflicts exist. Such products are in demand in the market, whereas their consumption can cause effects unwanted by the society.

The meaningfulness-focused definition of marketing is inclusive in at least five ways. First, meaningfulness naturally benefits from multi-sidedness, that is, customers are considered objects, not only subjects. Interactions and other forms of

interfaces between providers and users occur and have an influence on marketing. Second, it allows any kind of institution to practice marketing. Third, to be meaningful, an institution must consider both demand-stimulating and demand-satisfying activities on equal terms. If what has been promised is not delivered on, the offering will not be meaningful and will not make sufficient sense in the user's life. Thus, marketing is reestablished as a discipline and practice that stands on two legs. Fourth, meaningfulness does not prescribe which organizational resources and activities are marketing and which are not. Ideally, what is necessary to generate demand and to satisfy it is determined individually and contextually. In reality, this is mostly impossible to implement, especially in consumer markets. However, at least to some extent, predetermined resources and activities can be specified for typical case situations, which thereby allows segmentation to occur. Segmentation should ideally be based on functional criteria that relate to the users' processes rather than traditional criteria. However, there is no predetermined set from which to choose and within which to remain when designing marketing, which fosters open-mindedness and innovative decision-making. Fifth, marketing is not the exclusive responsibility of any function. Demand-satisfying resources and activities take place across many organizational functions and processes depending on where the impact on users may occur. Instead of being exclusive, marketing as meaningfulness is ubiquitous—it involves a customer-appreciating marketing mindset that permeates most parts of an organization. For employees in demand-satisfying functions and processes, Gummesson (1991) introduced the term “part-time marketer.” The primary responsibility of such an employee is to handle technical tasks, yet they should simultaneously be able to perform in a customer-focused, marketing-like manner.

Interestingly, these aspects of meaningfulness-focused marketing characterize what has been established in both service and relationship marketing research: a focus on phenomenon instead of primarily activities, on process rather than the structure of predetermined activities, on ubiquitous marketing resources rather than only exclusively specialized marketers, on multi-sidedness with customers participating in interactions instead of customers being viewed as objects, on value facilitation rather than the provision of readymade value, and finally, demand-satisfying activities on par with promise-making demand stimulation. Marketing thereby returns to the understanding of marketing before the ambition to professionalize marketing as a management discipline commenced 70 years ago (cf. Cronin and Nagel, 2024; see Hunt, 2020; Tadejowski and Jones, 2008).

The need for extended offerings for marketing reform

Another aspect to consider when rethinking marketing is the impact on what is offered to customers when moving toward more complex provider–customer interfaces beyond mere goods or core services. To be helped in a meaningful way, customers look for additional assistance to handle their many important and necessary processes, such as helpful delivery and payment systems, assistance in problem situations, successful repairs and maintenance, the upgrading of purchased products, attentive and functioning personal or digital customer service

assistance, and more (see Grönroos, 2023). In a study on the discrepancy between firms' market offerings and their customers' expectations of what needs to be helped through such offerings, Strandvik *et al.* (2012) found that customers' expectations were based on far more elements in their lives and work than accounted for by the provided offerings. The latter were typically geared toward the need to manage a core process, such as a production process or financial solution. They called the extended customer requirements *customer needing* rather than the much narrower need concept. The introduction of smartphones provides a classic example of the importance of examining customer needings as a source of information for the development of goods and services for the market.

The innovation of smartphones, usually attributed to Apple's iPhone launched in 2007, began much earlier in the 1990s when Nokia's Communicator was introduced. By using the Communicator device, one could send and receive emails and faxes and surf the Internet. In an interview for the magazine *Suomen Kuvalehti* (Finland Illustrated Magazine) in 1999, Yrjö Neuvo, then technology director at Nokia, envisioned "multiphones" (his label for smartphones at the time) that "the current technology [at the end of the 1990s] is only a bleak hunch of the future" (Ukkola, 1999, p. 20). He continued that he "did not dare to guess what can be done with telephones ten years from now [that is, in 2009]" (p. 20). When Apple moved beyond technology and started to gather insights into people's everyday processes and life dreams, what they do and would like to do if they could, what obstacles they face, as well as trends in society, its technology could be adapted to serve its customers' needings. The iPhone with its extended mobile phone offering was launched in 2007. As to smartphones, the rest is history. The learning from this case and the study by Strandvik and his colleagues (Strandvik *et al.*, 2012) is that without a deep and extensive understanding of the users of goods and services and especially their needings beyond mere

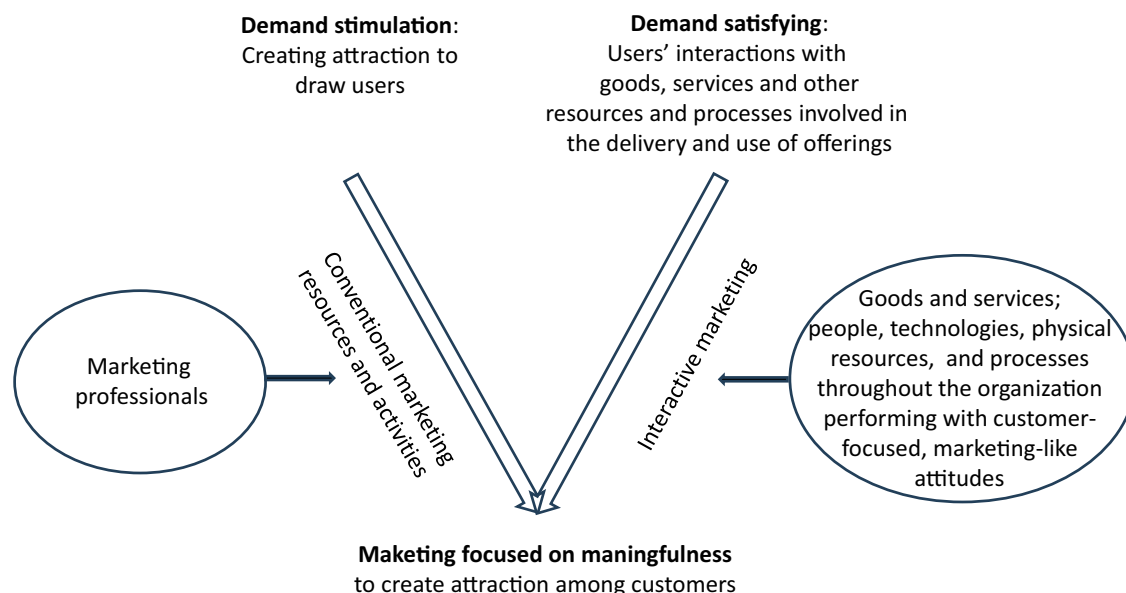
core-related needs, the possibilities for products to serve customers innovatively and successfully are difficult to exploit. Correspondingly, without such understanding marketing cannot be planned and implemented to achieve meaningful outcomes.

Additionally, there are everyday situations where offerings can be extended beyond their core. Retail shoppers can be expected to favor physical outlets with attractive and accessible servicescapes and attentive sales personnel or easy-to-navigate self-service systems over inattentive and complicated ones. For web outlets and other digital processes, similar behaviors can be expected.

Consequently, servicing customers requires *extended offerings* for them to consider. For marketing, this means that to become meaningful in customers' lives and work, rather than being resource driven, firms must develop their offerings based on comprehensive customer insights that extend beyond goods and core services. If an offering is too narrowly developed, such as a critical component of the customer's needing is not covered, it is apparent that the offering may be considered unsatisfactory and, thus, less meaningful and marketing may fail. Such extended offerings will help customers achieve something they consider valuable, with some offerings based on goods, and others with services at their core.

In conclusion, meaningfulness-focused marketing is focused on the two legs of demand stimulation and demand satisfying, as illustrated in Figure 1. When the professionalized marketing management approach was developed from the 1950s onward (and continued with the articulation of the AMA's 1985 definition), products mostly represented the latter leg sufficiently well. However, as customer interfaces have increased in content and customers have become more informed and powerful in the market, the ability of products to cover all the requirements of successful demand satisfying has gradually become increasingly insufficient. As a result, marketing has become progressively limp. In the figure, the

Figure 1 The two feet of meaningfulness-focused marketing



Source: Author's own work

term “user” is applied to indicate that marketing must consider different types of stakeholders. Offerings that users interact with can, of course, take different forms beyond the goods and services indicated in the figure. Figure 1 also demonstrates that marketing is ubiquitous and that marketing effects, particularly in the case of the supply side’s demand-satisfying activities, occur throughout the organization. Thus, that part of marketing is a mindset, a user-centered approach. As the marketing effects of demand-satisfying actions result from customers’ interactions with goods, services and other artifacts in the offerings, as well as with the many people and physical and digital resources and systems executing the extended offerings, a term from service research seems appropriate to describe this part of marketing. It is, therefore, referred to as *interactive marketing* in the figure. Naturally, demand stimulation is mainly the responsibility of marketing specialists, who manage conventional activities, such as sales, marketing communication and pricing, of course, using current and new technologies and channels.

Having conducted the analyses of what service is and how it can contribute to an alternative marketing perspective, in the next section the “classic” service marketing models from the 1970s and 1980s are examined with the aim of revealing how they can further contribute to a reform of marketing.

The classic service marketing models

In the early days of modern service marketing research, five service marketing models were introduced. This occurred in a six-year period from 1977 to 1983. These models are *Shostack’s molecular model* (introduced in, 1977), which includes service production elements in addition to conventional marketing activities needed for successful service marketing; *Eiglier and Langeard’s servuction model* (1977), which focuses on the marketing effects of interactions between production resources; *Grönroos’s service interaction model* (1978) with its focus on the interactive elements in service production and their marketing impact; *Booms and Bitner’s 7P model* (1982), which extends the 4P model of conventional marketing with service-oriented elements; and *Berry’s relationship marketing model* (1983) in which the concept of relationship marketing for service was introduced. The customers’ active role as subjects in the marketing process as well as Rathmell’s emphasis on the need to integrate service production and the service provision–consumption interface with marketing are evident in these models.

However, since then, studies of specifically the *marketing* of services have been close to nonexistent, which I have called “enter service quality, exit service marketing” (Grönroos, 2020, p. 292). Service quality was introduced in service research in the 1980s (Grönroos, 1984; Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985) and quickly caught the academic service community’s interest on a large scale. This interest continued well into the 2000s. My interpretation is that since service marketing demands genuinely new approaches that did not fit the dominating marketing paradigm of the time, scholars became hesitant to study it more deeply (Grönroos, 2020, p. 292). Service quality was centered on consumer behavior and thus offered a topic that was less risky but still sufficiently close and important to marketing. As a result, studies of service quality became a substitute for studying service marketing. Because service

quality incorporates consumer-influencing elements, such as the Servqual and Servperfect dimensions (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988; Cronin and Taylor, 1992) and the distinction between perceived technical and functional quality dimensions (Grönroos, 1984), this worked.

In Table 1, the “classic” models are summarized. In addition to considering service production (provision and delivery) as a part of marketing, the models explain the production and delivery resources that interact with and influence customers’ experiences. They also emphasize that such interactions involve customers, who therefore participate in the process of production and delivery as subjects and influence how the service is shaped. Furthermore, it is noted that communication effects are embedded in service production and delivery processes and in how the involved human and physical resources function. In other words, the models demonstrate that physical and human resources function as carriers of services. This is similar to the notion of resources as distribution mechanisms of service, as suggested in the more recent literature on service as a logic.

In sum, the classic service marketing models introduced in the early years of modern service marketing research clearly emphasize the importance to marketing of service production and how the involved human and physical resources are planned and performed. Therefore, the need to expand the offering beyond its core element was underscored. The models demonstrate that it is essential for marketing to embrace demand-satisfying processes in situations in which more content than the core of an offering is included. Naturally, the models do not include the effects of digitalization, robotics and artificial intelligence on the design and the use of physical resources and systems in service production. Despite the models’ emphasis on customers’ role in producing and shaping services, at the time they could not consider the role of customers as operators of digitalized service systems beyond their role in traditional self-service. However, such aspects can be considered extensions of the resource and customer participation elements of the models changing the implementation of service marketing but not of its nature.

In the next section, learnings from recent service research as a phenomenon and the classic service marketing models are employed to develop a dynamic marketing model based on the meaningfulness perspective.

Implementation of marketing based on creating meaningfulness

Making firms meaningful to their customers should generate meaningful outcomes for the other main stakeholders in Cronin’s (2022) triad as well. In this section, I focus on customers; however, meaningful outcomes for customers that do not provide a beneficial economic outcome for the provider will not be meaningful to the provider. Providers may also have goals other than economic. Employee, manager and owner satisfaction with their jobs and the business are examples of other potential goals. Obviously, to be meaningful, marketing must provide a desired outcome both for the customers and the provider. Although firms can achieve these results without causing positive effects from society’s perspective, societal requirements should also be considered. However, to

Table 1 Analysis of the five classic service-making models

Model	Focus	Content	Emphasis	Innovative aspect	Contribution to marketing
Shostack's (1977) molecular model	Visualization of elements of service production in addition to conventional marketing variables and their impact on the customers	Comparison between the tangible and intangible elements of goods and services as marketing entities; demonstrates that goods and service offerings are mostly intertwined	Services often entwined with their human representatives. In addition, conventional marketing variables and marketing effects created by elements in the production process	Emphasis on the need to develop new concepts for marketing to function in service enterprises. The notion that both goods and services offerings consist of tangible and intangible elements	Emphasis on the complexity of the marketed entity. Consideration of marketing as not only comprising conventional variables
Eiglier and Langeard's (1977) servuction model	Describes interactions with customers to produce services and service experiences	Customer contact personnel and physical resources supported by a back-office system, and involved customers interact to shape services. Due to the nature of the interactions, services may be shaped differently	Importance of service production to customers' experiences and its role in marketing. The role of customers as participants in the shaping of service	Emphasis on how production has a marketing-like impact on customers' experiences and their participation in service production and marketing	Marketing not only demand stimulation but comprises marketing-like performances by production processes as well. Focus on the active role of customers as subjects
Grönroos's (1978) interactive marketing model	Describes elements of the service offering and their interactions with customers	Service contact personnel, accessibility of the service interact with customers to create marketing impact. In addition to a core service, auxiliary services are required	The importance to marketing of the embedded communication of the service contact personnel and physical resources and of their accessibility. Customers' influence on the service. Production resources considered carriers of services	Emphasis on the importance to marketing of the communication effects of service contact personnel and of how accessible the service is. The notion that customers participate in and influence service production	Emphasis on the importance of service production to marketing. Involvement of accessibility, communication effects and customers' influence on the service as subjects as well as conventional marketing
Booms and Bitner's (1982) 7P model	Extends marketing's 4P model by adding variables that reflect services	Three service-grounded elements (people, process, physical elements) are added to marketing's 4P model	What must be included in marketing planning in addition to its conventional content demonstrated by the three added elements	Emphasis on the importance of service processes and service contact personnel as well as the role of physical resources to marketing, in addition to conventional marketing	Emphasis on the need for marketing to integrate service-specific elements with conventional variables in marketing planning
Berry's (1983) relationship marketing model	The need of service enterprises to take a long-term approach to marketing	Model focuses on relationship-making strategies: core service strategy, relationship customization, service augmentation, relationship pricing and internal marketing	The need to think in longer terms in service marketing planning. Alternative means of reinforcing relationship marketing	Emphasis on the long-term aspect and the option to choose between focusing on core services or service augmentation. Emphasis on internal marketing	Emphasis on a long-term approach, relationship-based pricing and the need for internal marketing

Source: Author's own work

demonstrate the nature and content of the model and assuming that marketing is conducted to ensure that all stakeholders achieve meaningful outcomes, only the customer is regarded in the model. The dynamic model is portrayed in Figure 2.

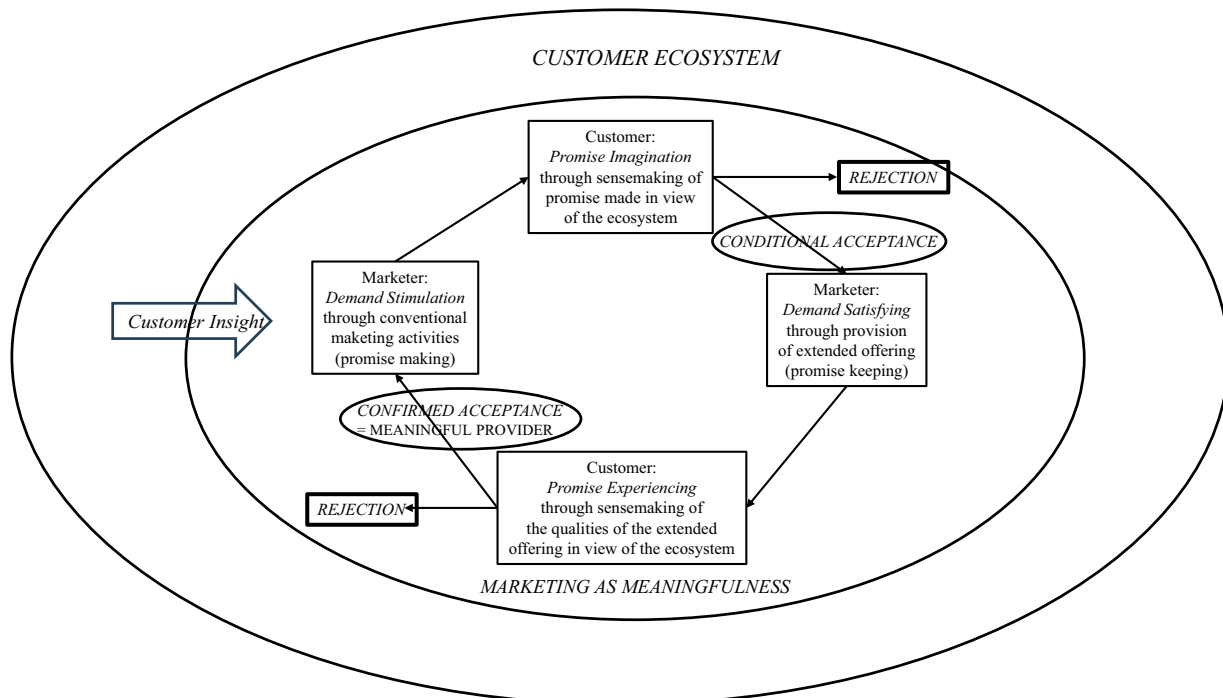
Figure 2 shows that two distinct processes, namely, a customer process and a marketing process, exist and are entwined. It is essential that marketing is regarded as an ongoing process, in which the customer process is recognized. The interplay between the two processes is examined and forms the basis for marketing decisions. Both processes include two basic stages. However, before the firm’s marketing process commences, essential information about the customers’ needs must be collected. For the firm, making promises and thereby stimulating demand to attract customers to consider its offering (goods, services, information and other resources) must first be managed successfully so that the customers will decide to buy. If this stage is successful, the firm can demonstrate its ability to keep the promises made by undertaking activities that satisfy the demand generated. Thus, the marketing process consists of a *promise-making demand stimulation* process and a *promise-keeping demand-satisfying* process. The process follows a promise management logic, as suggested by Grönroos (2009).

On the customer side, the two processes are a promise-imagination and a promise-experiencing process. *Promise imagination* means that the customer strives to comprehend the conveyed offering to determine whether it can be expected to serve their need in a sufficiently meaningful manner. In a positive situation, the firm will achieve *conditional acceptance* of its offering, and the process will continue; otherwise, the offering will be rejected. Finne and Grönroos (2017) asserted

that such an imagination process is based on embedded communication, some of which is accessed through sales and media, some gained through customers’ previous experiences and experiences communicated by peers, and some based on competitors’ communication. In making a sense of such input so that they can make a positive or negative decision, the customer assesses the value of the promise conveyed. If the promise is accepted, the firm will be able to provide the offering. In contrast, *promise experiencing* denotes the customer’s usage of the extended offering as well as the related process of determining whether the promise made has been satisfactorily fulfilled. If the promise experiencing results in a positive outcome, a meaningful offering has been provided. At this point, the firm has proved that it is a meaningful provider of the required offering and has managed to satisfy the customer’s need. The conditional *acceptance is confirmed*, and the customer will likely continue to favor the firm. The whole loop has thus achieved a favorable outcome. If the promise experiencing results in a negative outcome, this will lead to the rejection of the provider and its offering, and the relationship will likely end.

Making promises represents marketing’s demand stimulation leg. Promise keeping relates to its demand-satisfying leg. Conventional marketing activities, which utilize current and emerging technologies and channels, can be employed to make promises. Such activities are likely managed by marketing professionals and salespeople. Demand-satisfying activities aimed at keeping promises are performed throughout the organization by most functions. The employees who carry out these functions must be responsible for the user-focused, marketing-like performance of the demand-satisfying processes

Figure 2 Marketing as meaningfulness: the marketing–customer interplay



Source: Author’s own work

that is required. Notably, as suggested by the service marketing models, especially emphasized in the servuction model by Langeard and Eiglier (1977), demand satisfying is influenced by back-office processes as well. Customers' perceptions of the level of meaningfulness are also a function of, for example, how well quality problems and service failures are handled, to what extent payment and invoicing systems avoid creating inconveniences and problems and occasionally even having cost effects on customers, and how understandable and helpful call center responses are. Despite the fact that customers perceive such processes as meaningfulness-influencing elements of the offering delivered, in the organization, they are usually considered internal administrative, financial, legal or operational issues. In the service literature, the *hidden services* concept has been used (Grönroos, 2024).

The meaningfulness loop, including the marketer and customers' respective processes, is embedded in an outer field called the *customer ecosystem*. The customer ecosystem concept is developed and proposed in the customer-dominant logic (CDL) research stream (Heinonen and Strandvik, 2020). The customers' logics are dependent on their ecosystems. In CDL, customer logic is defined as "customers' idiosyncratic reasoning of and their sense making about appropriate ways for achieving their goals and conducting their tasks" (Heinonen and Strandvik, 2015, p. 478). Marketing is seen "as a ubiquitous mental model with customer logic as a foundation for business" (p. 477). Customers experience and comprehend the advantages and disadvantages of alternative providers and offerings according to their rationale within a perceived reality framed by their ecosystems. This customer ecosystem is a system of actors (the provider, alternative providers, other customers, communities) and the physical or virtual structures that relate to the context. Therefore, what has been referred to as a service ecosystem (Vink *et al.*, 2021), within which a provider functions, is part of the customer ecosystem (Heinonen and Strandvik, 2015). Customers shape their ecosystems either individually or driven by a brand (Lipkin and Heinonen, 2022). Successful marketing requires firms to acquire extensive knowledge of their customers' logics and ecosystems. Without such knowledge, marketing will likely fail. In the model illustrated in Figure 2, this requirement is indicated by the "Customer insight" arrow.

Discussion

Hunt *et al.* (2022) argued that there is still a need for marketing as a discipline. However, for the sake of marketing, a new approach is necessary. Marketing's current myopic focus will likely not allow the discipline to regain credibility. Meaningfulness provides a perspective informed by service scholarship, which has the potential to reform marketing. Other approaches to marketing that may serve the same purpose can probably be developed. However, the present article demonstrates that marketing's current problem can be resolved through service-based scholarship. Breaking the discipline's inclination toward activities as its nucleus allows a shift in attention to a higher order understanding of marketing as a phenomenon. Additionally, the service marketing models analyzed in this article show that extended offerings are required, resulting in the need for marketing to cover demand-

satisfying processes. They also indicate how this could be managed. The customer contacts in service provision typically include more content than a core service, so offerings are typically extended beyond this core. For goods as well, the customer contact increases in content, and similar offering extensions are needed.

According to the definition of service as the provision of help to customers and other users of offerings (goods, services, information and more), it is suggested that to be helped, customers are likely to search for offerings that they consider meaningful. Following Grönroos (2023, p. 7), meaningfulness is described as "*being relevant and purposeful in users' lives*," such that users are helped to manage their individual life or organizational work processes in ways that are valuable to them. Thus, marketing as a phenomenon is defined as "*the process by which an organization is made meaningful to the users of its offerings*." In doing this, marketing will likely create an attraction for the organization's goods and services among current and potential customers. A failure to create meaningfulness can be expected to lead to rejection.

The meaningfulness approach emphasizes the need for marketing to return to its roots as an organizational process that stands on two legs, namely, stimulating demand and demand satisfying, where the latter leg has, over the course of time, become increasingly shaky. This has resulted in a situation where other functions, such as production and operations, supply chain management and IT, have assumed responsibility for a substantial portion of the activities that are demand satisfying, which has thereby likely diluted their marketing effects. Originally, such functions were considered part of marketing (Tadejewski and Jones, 2008). Marketing as meaningfulness requires that, to be able to regain responsibility for the marketing discipline and practice, marketing must reassert its responsibility for demand satisfying. In addition, marketing needs to influence how the many hidden services function; otherwise, marketing will not be able to successfully fulfil the promises made. Marketing is thus truly ubiquitous and appears as an *aspect* of organizational performance.

Implications

Since marketing relates to most organizational functions, traditional organizational solutions cannot be expected to carry out the many demand-satisfying functions likely to focus on customers and marketing-like performance. Most probably, the marketing manager or CMO responsible for demand stimulation will not be able to successfully assume responsibility for them. The major duties of demand-satisfying functions are the performance of tasks of a technical nature, and the first priority of the involved personnel is to handle such tasks properly. However, to contribute to marketing, these tasks must be conducted in a user-focused, marketing-like manner. As such personnel will likely continue to report to their own function managers, two requirements for marketing will follow. First, the employees must possess the necessary customer-centered and marketing-like attitudes and learn the necessary skills to interact and communicate in such a manner that they make a positive impression on customers. Second, their managers must observe similar attitudes and learn to plan and supervise accordingly. In addition to their other duties, they

must take responsibility for the required customer-centered and marketing-like performance of their respective functions. In line with this, the ultimate responsibility for marketing in the organization must be aligned with top management. Consequently, meaningfulness-based marketing cannot be organized in any conventional manner. Instead, as marketing is not one function but a customer-centered mindset, marketing must be established in the organization *as a marketing attitude of mind*. This requires decisive internal development programs, as advised by what in the service literature is called *internal marketing*, which was introduced in Berry's (1983) relationship marketing model and extensively developed by Grönroos (2015) as a strategic issue for organizations.

In this managerial marketing context, the co-creation of value may be possible. However, this requires interaction between the two sides. The customer must be willing to invite the provider to cocreate, and the provider must be prepared to engage in co-creation with the customer.

Marketing's focus on activities has contributed to the fragmentation of the discipline. Business-to-business marketing has demanded a different approach than marketing to consumers, and the same approach is not applicable to services as to goods. Consumer behavior has established a domain distinct from marketing. When considering marketing primarily as a phenomenon, it becomes apparent that, in principle, differences between the type of market or category of product are obscured. Customers need to manage a variety of everyday tasks to achieve desired goals. Storbacka and Moser (2020) distinguish between individual customers' life and business customers' work processes. It is evident that such life and work processes involve a set of everyday tasks that must function satisfactorily and, thus, be facilitated in a meaningful way, for desired goals to be fulfilled. Such tasks may be of different types between individual and business customers. However, for both types of customers, their role in the pursuit of goals is similar. Consequently, when implementing marketing as meaningfulness, differences between BtoC and BtoB may occur only in execution.

Because marketing is an aspect of organizational functions and in a way alters their performance without changing their basic nature as the performance of technical tasks, "it is doubtful whether marketing is the most accurate term to describe it" (Grönroos, 2023, p. 7). Using this term may create negative attitudes toward this aspect of their job among those who are responsible for the supply side of marketing, thus making it unnecessarily difficult to instill the necessary customer-focused attitudes among them. It will therefore be necessary to discuss this terminology issue.

Finally, when successfully implemented, the customer-centered nature of the meaningfulness approach to marketing has the potential to create marketing that truly honors *the marketing concept* postulated in 1960 by Robert J. Keith, then the executive vice president of The Pillsbury Company: "The consumer, not the company, is in the middle. . . . Companies revolve around the customer, not the other way around" (Keith, 1960, p. 35).

Notes

- 1 A summary of this debate, including references to involved articles can be found, for example, in Hunt (2020), Grönroos (2023), and Cronin and Nagel (2024).

- 2 The current marketing definition introduced by the AMA in 2007 has the following wording: "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." It replaces the previous definition from 1985 with essentially the same nucleus of marketing activities but adds "set of institutions," which indicates that marketing is not only for business organizations and "customers, clients, partners and society at large." This indicates that marketing has more stakeholders than customers. Furthermore, the 2007 definition replaced the previous formulation that marketing should create satisfaction with "exchange offerings that have value," a formulation that should apparently be interpreted as value created by the providing institution (Grundlach and Wilkie, 2009). This change of outcome expression sadly shifts the focus from satisfaction as a customer-focused term to a provider-oriented formulation.
- 3 It is fascinating to observe that despite the pivotal role in service research of services as objects of production, marketing, and consumption, there seems to have been no discussion of services in this capacity since the 1990s. In the context of service development, Edvardsson (1996) built on the suggestion that service experiences are characterized by two dimensions, namely, technical, outcome-related and functional, process-related dimensions (Grönroos, 1984). He emphasized that consumers have primary needs that are fulfilled with core and auxiliary services and secondary needs that are covered by how the services function as processes. Overall, models of services as a category of products or processes have scarcely been developed beyond mainly the 1980s and 1990s. Given the abundance of studies on the many subfields of service, such as service design and development, service innovation, and service experience, it is worrying that this research is undertaken without any well-articulated models of what constitutes services (Grönroos, 2020), nor is service as a phenomenon considered in such studies.
- 4 Traditionally, value for customers is believed to be derived from production outputs, such as goods and services, that are delivered to customers. This is also evident in AMA's 2007 marketing definition, reinforcing marketing's inside-out approach and ultimately its current myopic drift.

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Further reading

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