

BY DON E. SCHULTZ

MYTH MANIA

ONE WOULD ASSUME during difficult times, such as today, that managers would immediately review their previous assumptions and actions, and the beliefs on which they are based.

Yet it seems just the opposite is happening. Managers are hunkering down, hiding out and falling back on the tried and true. Instead of stepping back and trying to find new and improved methods to change the game, managerial focus seems to be primarily on trying to maintain the historical status quo: to maintain and support the myths on which most businesses are based.

One definition of a myth is “an unproved or false collective belief, used to justify a social institution.” Today, we see myths all around us. Just look at the references to the 1930s Great Depression and FDR’s mythical powers.

In business, and especially in marketing, myths shore up managerial decisions.

Given some additional governmental financial support, what do the automobile companies do? They spend it on traditional mass media advertising, using the funds to increase or reinforce what didn’t work before and is unlikely to work again.

What are the financial institutions doing with their bailout funds? They’re pouring them into bonuses to maintain the management that created the mess in the first place.

What do airlines do? They reduce fares, which means they must therefore reduce services. That is what lost them customers in the first place.

And what do marketing managers—with more myths than sense—do? They spend a wad of money on the Super Bowl, hoping to get a bit of press or buzz or whatever strokes their egos.

They are all myths but are all acceptable because they support the collective beliefs that support the social institutions of marketing management.

Yes, businesses run on myths based on assumptions made years ago, which have now become part of the generalized operating knowledge base. Never mind that the marketplace is dynamic, customers are ever-changing and institutions are not what they were even six months ago.

While there are plenty of marketing myths to attack, I’m going in a different direction today. I want to challenge the academic myth-makers whose concepts, theories and methodologies have resulted in much of what we today call “modern marketing management.”

Academicians, if you don’t know, live off unpaid, published academic research in accepted and revered academic journals. That’s what we are rewarded for and promoted on, and what provides the basis on which our peers evaluate us and what we believe is our role in the great scheme of the universe. As a professor, you can be a lousy teacher, an inept educator and terror to students and other faculty, but if you publish in the “right” journals, which are then cited by other academicians, you’re home free. Tenure, reverence, boondoggle conferences: All can be yours for life.

When your academic research is adopted by business, it becomes a part of business practice. One prime example? The industry’s belief in the frequency of three in media planning. Few in the media business know where the revered “frequency of three” came from, but almost every optimization model in the world uses it as its base. (Hint: It came from a 1965 academic journal, but it has never been

proven.) It’s just another one of the many marketing and communication myths that both business and academia run on.

The problem with academic research, however, is that it is truly myth-like. Supposedly based on scientific principles, at its heart, academic research relies largely on peer reviews. That is, evaluations of papers or research by other academicians. For example, an academic paper is developed based on an experiment, a hypothesis, an investigation, a research study or whatever. It’s circulated to a relevant journal. The editor selects a group of peers to review the paper. Peer approval gives the paper academic credibility because it was passed on by supposedly qualified peers, resulting in instant certification by others in that academic area.

Having passed the peer review, the paper, research study or opinion is then published for the rest of the academic world to see—to use, quote and cite.

Other academics see the paper. They’re inspired to develop their own views or extend the views of the published research. Thus, the circular myth of supposedly “scientific research” begins to widen. It’s read by others who then take the finding as fact, and off we go on a whole new stream of academic myth-making.

The only problem with all this? Peer reviews are generally worthless. As one critic has said, “Peer review is a non-validated charade whose processes generate results little better than does chance.” Only 8% of the members of Sigma Xi, The Scientific Research Society, agree that peer reviews work. Yet, once published and often cited, academic research is almost never challenged.

That’s the problem. Once myths are established—that is, they become a “collective belief established to justify a social institution”—they just go on and on and on.

Unfortunately, marketing, and even general management, continues to support these myths. Beliefs go unchallenged and are never questioned. They become part of the fabric of the field, and continue to be deified, even when they’re no longer relevant.

Today, to get marketing back on track, myth-busting and myth-challenging is needed. Many of our most basic marketing and communication concepts need to be reviewed. That, however, begs the question: Who is willing to do that, either individually or collectively? Any suggestions? **m**

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