

Swords to Ploughshares: New Metaphors for Marketing

By Kathleen M. Hosfeld

Recently, as I was browsing the “management” books aisle at a favorite bookstore, I pulled down a book on marketing and opened it to the first chapter. “Marketing is war,” the author wrote. Furthermore, he said, if the reader didn’t have the stomach for war, then “get out.”

We live in an interesting time in which the structures of one era exist side by side with those of a new one that is emerging. On the one hand we have the “business as machine” and “marketing as war” metaphors. In the early days of the corporation when people were trying to get their heads around how to direct large workforces – which were new to their experience – the only reasonable comparison was the mobilization of troops and resources for war. At about the same time, people were trying to make management and the enhancement of human work performance into a science. That meant breaking down work roles into components, isolating variables and trying to measure them for potential improvement.

But a metaphor is just a lens. Sometimes it doesn’t help us to see all that we should in a situation. Sometimes it colors our perceptions in ways we don’t want. In the last several decades many have been looking for metaphors that reflect the more dynamic aspects of organizations, markets and economies – the parts that seem to elude our attempts to control them. They are looking for metaphors that are more comprehensive than war.

One metaphor to explore is that of “marketing as a garden.” Many have suggested that economies are living systems and bear resemblance to dynamic ecosystems. Let’s make a distinction between a wild ecosystem and a living system that has been shaped by human intention. A garden is a living system that exists because a human being or human beings created it. While we don’t have control over all the dynamics in the garden, human influence determines a great deal of what occurs. Our organizations, markets, industries or economies might be considered gardens shaped by human actions, but still influenced by forces outside human control.



Two interesting ideas emerge when we consider the idea of marketing as a form of tending a garden:

There Are No Departments in a Garden

First, when we look at the dynamics of a living system, we discover that it’s difficult to completely separate all the processes at work into discrete boxes. Managers today tend to make artificial distinctions between marketing and management, finance, manufacturing, research and more. The distinctions will depend on how one defines marketing itself.

Let’s assume that our definition of marketing, for the moment, is the actions of an organization to attract and keep customers. We could say that price-setting is a marketing function. But frequently a marketing decision is also a management decision. Price-setting is determined in part by knowledge of what the customer can and will pay. But it is also a management decision that has to reflect the



costs to produce and the company's goals for profit. Product development is another example. The design of a product impacts the customers who will be interested in it; it's a marketing issue. It's also a management and manufacturing issue.

The choosing of which customer segments/markets to enter is often reserved for senior management and strategists. This can also be a marketing decision; marketers have experience in the field that helps determine which segments are the best fit for the company's strengths.

Marketing is actually a set of complex, interrelated actions/decisions taking place within a dynamic system. This is mirrored in the nature of living systems, where various natural "sub-processes" serve multiple functions – those that can be compared with marketing and those that are more "management" functions.

One conclusion that can be drawn, and has been drawn already by theorists, is that a system view of business means that marketing can't be separated from management. The silos we have created between marketing and other organizational sub-systems are artificial distinctions that actually impede interaction needed for the optimal health of our garden/our business.

"Too Much Alike" Increases Intensity of Competition

A second interesting idea comes when we consider the nature of competition in a living system. As some have sought new metaphors of organization, they've thrown out the idea of competition completely and replaced it with the ideal that all companies should just "get along" and collaborate. If we look at living systems, however, we have to accept that competition is a fact of life. Only just so many organisms can be supported by the resources found within the boundaries of a specific ecosystem. Only just so many companies can serve the same set of customers with a similar product.

What we find in living systems, however, is that the more similar two competing organisms are, the more intense their competition. Conversely, the more differentiated two competing organisms are, the more likely it is they will achieve an equilibrium that allows both to prosper. In business, we see this when two companies operate too similarly and offer the same essential product or service – they compete more intensely. Companies that do not compete head-to-head are more likely to peacefully co-exist, or even partner, with others in their marketplace. This second lesson from living systems underscores the need for organizations to develop and sustain strategies that set them apart in ways that are meaningful to customer.

These two implications are likely just a starting place for cultivating the metaphor of the garden. What can you see through this lens? Plant the idea in the back of your mind and see what sprouts.

Note: Some of the ideas within the following journal articles contributed to this essay: The Anatomy of Competition, by Bruce Henderson, Journal of Marketing; and General Living Systems Theory and Marketing: A Framework for Analysis, by R. Eric Reidenbach & Terence A. Oliva, Journal of Marketing.



Kathleen Hosfeld is the President of Hosfeld & Associates, Inc. Since 1989, Hosfeld & Associates' has worked at the intersection of organizational strategy and marketing to help clients grow and prosper. We help clients think more clearly and boldly about their goals. We provide the skills and resources clients need to implement breakthrough strategies for profitability, service, and contribution. For more information, please visit <http://www.hosfeld.com>