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MARKETING ACTION RESEARCH APPROACH:
CAREER OF A PROFESSIONAL MARKETEEER

This paper analyses the case of a critical and reflective practitioner heuristic review of the career of a professional marketeer working in a number of national and international public limited companies and non-profit organizations in Europe and Asia. The epistemological background to action research is described and the description of this research approach is given.

Keywords: action research; heuristic review; professional marketeer.

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МАРКЕТИНГОВІ ДОСЛІДЖЕННЯ ЧЕРЕЗ МАРКЕТИНГОВІ ДІЇ:
КАР'ЄРА ПРОФЕСІЙНОГО ПРОДАВЦЯ

У статті проаналізовано з точки зору евристики кар'єру професійного продавця на прикладі одного з авторів, що пропрацював у декількох міжнародних корпораціях та неприбуткових організаціях Європи та Азії. Дано детальний опис дослідженню через дію як науковому методу, а також його епістемологічній основі.

Ключові слова: дослідження через дію; евристичний підхід; професійний продавець.

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МАРКЕТИНГОВЫЕ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЯ ЧЕРЕЗ МАРКЕТИНГОВЫЕ
ДЕЙСТВИЯ: КАРЬЕРА ПРОФЕССИОНАЛЬНОГО ПРОДАВЦА

В статье проанализирована с точки зрения эвристики карьера профессионального продавца на примере одного из авторов, проработавшего в нескольких международных корпорациях и неприбыльных организациях Европы и Азии. Дано подробное описание исследования действием как научного метода, а также его эпистемологической основы.

Ключевые слова: исследование через действие; эвристический подход; профессиональный продавец.

Introduction. In traditional (empirical) research the standard approach is to research other people. In case of the action research the key is self-reflection. This idea was originally put forward by Donald Schon (1983). The development of thinking over the course of one's career is similar in technique to that described by Jean McNiff who started working as a researcher/consultant in Ireland working in the field of education. She used action research to examine how she might improve her practice as a teacher. In the first author case (Michael Dent), the career of a professional marketeer has already run over 3 decades.

The author describes how he developed through practice and experience in certain organisations at certain points in time. This may in turn has helped him to better understand his own genesis and use this information to become a better communica-

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tor and a lecturer in the field of marketing having reflected on and learned from his own past experiences.

3 key phases refer to his experiences in the UK and Belgium (roughly 1970 to 2005), Latin America & the USA (2000 to 2001) and Malaysia (2006 to date)

The approach taken here is that of the living thesis as described by Wong (2003). And the fundamental problem is the absence of any prior action research in the field of international business over the time frame of 3 decades.

The research question that the authors seek to answer can be broken down into 3:

- Understanding the rationality and efficacy of one's practice.
- Own understanding of these practices.
- The situations in which these practices were carried out.

Literature Review. Action research was first defined by the social scientist Kurt Lewin (1946). The purpose of action research is normally to improve practice, enhance skill levels and develop a researchers' ability to critically evaluate the actions. This leads to a virtuous circle where a researcher is able to look at different courses of action and select effective and efficient solutions. The history and development of action research was very much in the area of education - and still much of the literature is education based.

In the author's case the circle does indeed come back to education. However, the starting point is the career in marketing from which he has moved to that of a lecturer at a university. It could be said that the purpose of his thesis is to benefit society (primarily through students) by firstly understanding and critically reviewing the past actions and then seeking specific learning points as to how he could have improved his practice.

Jack Whitehead (2000) believed that action research reports can be judged in terms of whether the author shows that they are offering explanations, rather than only observations and descriptions of practice by living out their declared values. From there the author very much wants to communicate what he learned, both the theory of marketing and the experiences of those working in it.

It is not the author's intention to engage in a post facto justification of his actions in order to reduce his own internal levels of cognitive dissonance. But as Johnson & Duberley (2000) concluded "it follows that management research cannot be carried out in some intellectual space which is autonomous from the researcher's own biography".

The discipline in which the author's proposal is grounded is that of normative microeconomics. This is traditionally referred to as managerial economics (following the typology of Douglas Hague) and this is where he (as a marketer) worked most of his life. However, the proposed research methodology follows the living thesis paradigm (Whitehead, 2002) and hence his approach is necessarily inter-disciplinary. In a sense, his study is an ethnographic investigation into the field (or society) of marketing.

Marketing action research is about (Perry & Gummesson, 2004) "a person's or a group's involvements in actions related to a market place that occurred in the past and that can affect our present understanding and knowledge, which in turn can affect future actions".

The normal practice of action research is shown in the diagram below, Figure 1. A researcher identifies his/her problem and then formulates an initial plan. The plan

is put into action and the results are monitored and evaluated, this then leads to a revised plan and further stages of reflection, evaluation and replanning. Hence, a researcher is actively conducting a research whilst simultaneously handling a real life problem.

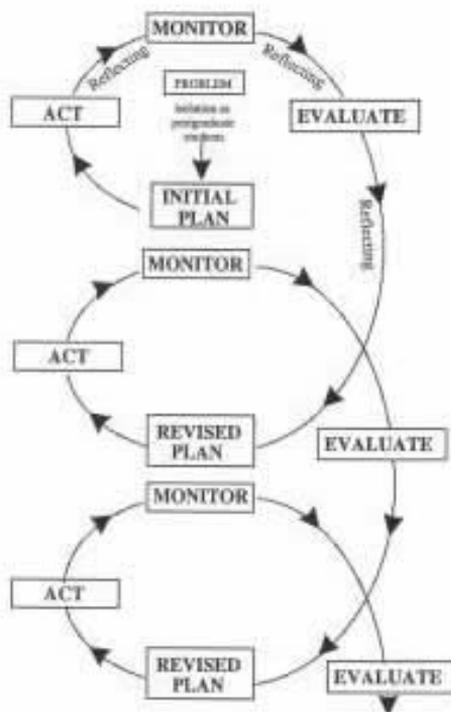


Figure 1. How a researcher is actively conducting a research whilst simultaneously handling a real life problem

Discussions. During the author's entire career the positions have ranged within ocean transport, travel agencies, management consultancy, tour operations, air freight, road express and later air express & international mail. The common themes are threefold: service sector, transportation & travel, all with a Global dimension.

The proposed approach differs in that the research is based on actions in the past, specifically various marketing programmes, initiatives, product launches, marketing plans etc., whilst working for a large multinational at 3 companies different continents over the period of 25 years.

Action research is not new but is still developing in areas outside education. Marketing is an area which, to date, has not seen much work on the topic, certainly Kates & Robertson (2004) found there was no academic marketing literature in the field at that time. This was addressed by a special issue of the European Journal of Marketing in that year. Thompson & Perry (2004) have looked at work practices in one organisation and then attempted to generalise their findings to another organisation. Whilst the approach seemed successful the time period the research was con-

ducted in was just under two years. In terms of epistemology the surprising outcome was that one paradigm (critical theory) fitted the first organization, and a different paradigm (realism) was applied in the second instance.

A problem here is that following Kuhn's incommensurability thesis a useful dialogue across paradigm boundaries or between two paradigms is impossible as they have no common frame of reference. At this stage the author is unsure how his epistemology will evolve. But it does seem clear that he needs to place himself under the colours of one (and only one) paradigm as an eclectic approach is not permissible.

Brown & Jones (2001) suggested a post-modernist approach, albeit with some misgivings. They even admitted that they have not entirely given up on the Enlightenment! The subjectivist ontology of post-modernism runs the risk of everything becoming relative and hence there is nothing further that can be usefully said. The ontological perspective the author has taken is objective but his epistemology is subjective. Hence placing him somewhere in the environment of critical theory or critical realism.

Using the critical theory/critical realism approach leads to thought, action and being. The action leads to improvement through Socratic questioning which can be enhanced through peer review (Stephen Rowland). This critical theory approach utilising Socratic questioning in addition to peer review is the basic methodology utilised in this research.

There are some written records of the programmes the author has worked on but no rich archive of e-mails, letters or reports. All recent (last 10 years) e-mails were purged (either deliberately or accidentally) by the IT departments of the companies the author worked for. The author has, however, kept marketing plans, brochures, PowerPoint presentations, toolkits and past job appraisals. In addition, the author has kept his work diaries over the period (primarily recording dates of appointments and meetings).

Another source of data is past colleagues, including bosses and team members. Some of these the author found particularly difficult. Others the author is found a joy to work with and for.

Some of these ex-colleagues the author still in touch with, primarily through social networking (Facebook, LinkedIn and Plaxo). Using these networks and a snowball sampling method the author elicited qualitative data from colleagues, direct reports, line managers and senior management and key suppliers (market research agencies, advertising agencies etc.). Qualitative data can be collected via a third party website to allow complete participant anonymity.

Findings: The Qualitative Approach. A good question to start with and fairly easily answered, at least at a superficial level. The author is a 59 year old, Caucasian male, separated, with two children in their mid-twenties (and both doing well). The author is still on good speaking terms with his ex-wife who lives in England whilst the author is based in Kuala Lumpur.

The author tends to refer to himself and sign letters with the initials "MMD". The author's first employer worked closely with the management consultancy firm "Coopers & Lybrand" and one of his most interesting projects in his formative years was with C&L working on a self-catering holiday lodge concept in Scotland. After a few years at business school the author ended up working with them in London. The

practice there was for everyone to be referred to by their initials. The author's boss was CDF (Christopher D. Foster). As his full name is Michael Murray Dent his initials were "MMD". For a variety of reasons the author quite liked this nomenclature and decided to adopt it for the rest of his professional career.

The author likes to look upon his actions with a marketer's hat on. And for that reason also his "brand name" is MMD.

If all of this seems a little self-analytical to quote here the PhD thesis of Graham John van Tuyl (2010):

"The thesis contains many references to "identity". I was (am) an Engineer, and that indicates a linear, reductionist and rational mindset. I also had a very argumentative personality, which was part of my upbringing. People could and did see me as a difficult and argumentative person, a "polarizer" between groups. I would speak the truth wherever I would see fit, without thinking about the consequences and the hurt that it would cause other people."

The idea of referring to a person as a brand is not a particularly new one, a brand being what passes as "knowledge" based on thoughts, beliefs, experiences, feelings and images.

Whilst this is a primarily self reflective emic study the academic contribution comes from the inductive generalisation to a wider context. More specifically, how international business managers and business lecturers can increase their efficacy in different cultures. With the continuing expansion of globalisation it is likely that many issues and problems that the author has faced will be encountered by the next generation with increasing frequency. Every situation is indeed different but patterns do emerge and generalisations of efficacious actions can be made.

In terms of actions that would have increased the probability of more satisfactory outcomes there are many different tactical moves that the author is sure would have helped. There is also a number of strategic moves that in retrospect look are questionable. This piece of work helps to define a framework and methodology which offer others an opportunity to capture these learning experiences into their own realities and hence improve their professional practice.

The approach described is that of a single case study based on the research philosophy of critical theory (with an objective ontology and subjective epistemology). The data was gathered primarily via social media (i.e., the Internet) using a homogeneous snowball sampling method. This elicited peer reviews of various episodes in the work place in which the author has participated.

The initial research was piloted and tested in order to: firstly, get the bugs out of the system and, secondly, improve the quality of the research instrument and thereby improve the richness of the data received.

Triangulation through combination of data sources (e-mails, diaries, Powerpoint presentations, toolkits etc.) helped to add rigour, breadth and depth, although not necessarily validation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Triangulation is more likely to support any finding or conclusion if it is based on several different sources. This is achieved by looking for corroboration in the responses of different work actors (colleagues etc.) on the same episode.

This research endeavours to define a framework and methodology which offers other international marketeers an opportunity to capture their own learning experiences and hence improve their professional practices.

Conclusions. Critical theory provides a powerful critique of positivism as it rejects the idea of a theory-neutral observational language, by showing how knowledge is underpinned by values and interests. As for the role of researchers, critical theory believes they are able to influence the results basing on their accumulated experiences.

Critical theory approach voices criticism of the processes of modernization, where it looks at modernization as an inflexible direction forced through by economic and administrative rationalization. It describes it as where "communication within these institutions is systematically distorted". Critical theory approach describes that public life cannot develop where public matters are not discussed by citizens. An "ideal speech situation" requires participants to have the same capacities of discourse and social equality, and in this version of the consensus theory of truth. Critical theory approach maintains that truth is what would be agreed upon in an ideal speech situation. Once we achieve the ideal speech situation where communicative distortions are removed, then we are able to assess the validity of particular claims to truth in open and honest debate.

Looking into the conceptualisations of management, the main underlying metaphors of much traditional management theory are functionalist. As a result of this functionalist approach, organizations are often assumed to be unified wholes with management goals representing everyone within an organization. Critical theory approach fights against this tendency as the belief is that each employee has his/her different voices and functionalism seeks to constrain human potential and desire to debate the conflict within and among people in an organization.

The critical theory approach has been widely used for fieldwork because critical theory enables researchers to examine processes and outcomes of relations of power even though doing research, but this manner of research is demanding, it is challenging to achieve consensus among respondents.

Emancipatory values matter, what was assumed by a positivist stance is contrary to critical theory as the positivist's role is that a researcher acts only as an explorer because researchers are not allowed to influence the results, so research remains, apparently, value free. However, according to critical theory, the ways in which we as researchers analyse and interpret empirical data, the results are contaminated by a researcher's socio-cultural factors and sensory experience.

Lastly, even though there is a number of problematic issues here, critical theory is an interesting approach to management research as it provides a framework through which it is possible to examine the political nature of management and organizations. It provides a standpoint from which to critique management processes and institutions. We hope to elucidate further on this with regard to specific management research in future papers.

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