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Interpreting Marketing

■ Introduction

There are certain assumptions within contemporary marketing about the consumer's behaviour, how they make decisions and how they understand marketing communications and interact with the marketplace, as a result, marketers identify groups that are clustered together in neat market segments ranging from the macro level, in which we target cultures or genders, to the micro where we target small groups of consumers that share similar backgrounds, income, education or locality etc. This approach assumes that these groups of consumers share a view of the world, a set of values and a level of knowledge that leads to a shared understanding and relationship to the product being promoted and the process of marketing. Although segmentation remains the dominant means of grouping consumers and identifying target markets, this chapter relocates the individual consumer at the centre of the marketing process by recognising that each individual consumer or customer will bring with them their own experience, knowledge etc. and that they are reflexive subjects who do not simply accept the messages propagated by marketers, but interpret, resist, negotiate and form their own perception of the marketing message.

■ The consumer as an individual

In order to gain an insight into how people understand marketing, it is important to identify some of the theoretical debates that go some

of the way to explaining how individuals interpret the debates and discourses that underpin THEF marketing. Additionally, in order to understand the consumer's relationship to marketing communications and the marketplace it is important to understand how authors, organisations or professional bodies select and produce marketing texts, as the nature of the publication will also guide the final interpretation. For example the authors of this book come from differing academic traditions, one from a social science background and the other from a business tradition, however the content and structure of this book is guided by certain shared beliefs about the role of marketing in contemporary society and a dissatisfaction with the ways in which traditional marketing texts locate the consumer and the marketing process. Therefore this book reflects the knowledge base, the values and the reality of the two authors as white middle class university lecturers.

Just like the authors, each individual consumer or customer brings with them a set of knowledge, a view of their position in the world and their personal values; these are formed by their social and cultural backgrounds, their gender, their educational background, their geographical location, and their friends or families, amongst other influences. These personal influences can be categorised as three distinct areas of influence: *epistemological*, *ontological* and *axiological* (for a good discussion of these aspects see Bryman, 2004:21-24), it is these areas of the individual's experience or personality that define the way in which they relate to the marketing process and the product or service being sold. These three areas can be simply defined as follows:

Epistemology Knowledge base	Ontology Position in world	Axiology Value systems
Relationship with marketing informed by:	Relationship with marketing informed by:	Relationship with marketing informed by:
Knowledge Individual's perception Individual's memory Individual's consciousness Individual's reason	Individual reality Individual influences Social & cultural background Class, Education, Religion Race Geographical roots	Their values Morals Informed by epistemology & ontology

Figure 9.1: Marketing and epistemology, ontology and axiology

The implication for this is that every individual consumer, producer and marketer will come to the table with a differing set of knowledges, everyday lived experience/existence and set of values, and therefore we have to recognise that there are multiple worldviews or multiple realities. This has huge implications for the future of marketing as technological advances and the fragmentation of communication channels means that we can be more sophisticated in understanding how the consumer relates to the marketing process and ultimately how we engage and tailor approaches and communication channels for the multiple realities of segmentation.

■ The epistemology and ontology of marketing

Before we can understand how consumers interpret the marketing process, it is important that as a researcher or student you question how your own ontological and epistemological understanding of marketing has been formed, as ultimately this will direct the way in which you read and understand this book, and how you judge the contribution it makes to the field of marketing.

Burrell and Morgan (1979:4) define **epistemology** as: “Assumptions about the grounds of knowledge – about how one might begin to understand the world and communicate this as knowledge to fellow human beings.” While Klein, Hirschheim and Nissen (1991:5) define epistemology as: “The nature of human knowledge and understanding that can possibly be acquired through different types of research and the appropriateness of the methods of investigation.”

In comparison, **ontology** represents a particular view of reality held by the consumer or individual, and there are two main ontological possibilities that are useful in understanding how the consumer interprets THEF marketing. The first is that there is one reality and it is observable by a consumer who has little if any impact on the object being observed. The second is that reality consists of an individual’s mental constructions of the objects with which they engage, and that the engagement impacts on the observer and on the situation being observed (Titscher and Meyer et al., 2000:14, Guba and Lincoln,