Chapter 34

PLACING ALDERSON AND HIS CONTRIBUTIONS TO MARKETING IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE*

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Abstract

Alderson’s contributions to marketing (management) thought and theory are so far reaching that they are considered by some to be essential in building an understanding of marketing. Given the importance of his contributions, it is indeed surprising that he is but a name to current marketing students. The chapter attempts to find out why by analyzing the intellectual milieu in which he lived. An analysis of the environment will not only shed light as to why he has been forgotten but will also reveal where his seminal contributions came from, what their inherent weaknesses are and what’s missing. The world of academic marketing began to change toward the end of Alderson’s life, in part due to his unprecedented efforts to make marketing more theoretical and scientific. Current trends in marketing scholarship and education and how these trends transformed the marketing discipline in this post Aldersonian era are also discussed.

1. Aldersonian Marketing Thought: An Introduction

Alderson has been all but forgotten in contemporary marketing scholarship. While earlier marketing textbooks (pre-1980s) readily acknowledged his ideas, insights and theories, this is no longer the case. For example, early editions of Philip Kotler’s marketing management textbooks had numerous pages discussing Alderson, yet none remain after the 9th (1997) edition. Alderson was the first and perhaps the only marketing scholar who modified and extended economic theory to meet the needs of marketing students and practitioners. The social sciences also gave his inquisitive mind new ideas. His creative genius adapted all of this information to the needs of marketing theory development. He is considered to have been the most vocal promoter and ‘agent provocateur’

*The number of references cited has been reduced to save space, given the extent of the material presented.
for marketing theory development and is known as the outstanding marketing theorist of the second half of the twentieth century.

Sadly, despite his achievements, he belongs to a class of academics that hardly exists today. Current marketing academics can no longer identify with his work. This is largely due to a lack of focus in contemporary education on marketing thought and theory at both the graduate and undergraduate level. Education plays a formidable role in the transmission of marketing knowledge from one generation of academics to the next one. If there are weaknesses in the transmission process, then a generation of authors could potentially be forgotten. They remain outside our consciousness until someone again recognizes their scholarship. For example, Ben Wooliscroft’s efforts to reintroduce Alderson to the marketing community have spurred a new interest in his contributions. It has also resulted in this book being available for current and future academics to explore, contemplate and enjoy.

Alderson is the founding father of the interdisciplinary approach to the study of marketing. He could also be considered to be the founding father of marketing management, largely due to both his market behavior theory as well as his other managerial contributions (Alderson 1957, 1965). Consumer research and marketing management have become academic marketing’s raison d’être ever since. He coined many new terms in marketing, redefined existing concepts and elaborated extensively on others. These terms, now taken for granted include:

Product differentiation, positioning, enterprise differentiation, potency of assortment, routinized transactions, competitive advantage, core market, fringe market, discrepancy of assortments, discrepancy of quantity, matching, marketing audit, information search, double search, demand heterogeneity, supply heterogeneity, meaningful and meaningless heterogeneity, transvection, sorts, ecological niche, perishable distinctiveness, plasticity, and principle of postponement.

It is rather ironic that marketing management is now an overwhelming focus in marketing education and, yet, mainstream academic marketers have largely forgotten this key figure. We need to ask the question why this seminal contributor to marketing theory has been neglected and even eliminated from the marketing discipline? What has happened to Aldersonian marketing thought in mainstream marketing? Why is it that contemporary marketing textbooks and published articles no longer cite Alderson and his contributions, as was the case a generation ago? In this twenty-first century, he is still being studied and cited, but not in mainstream marketing but rather in the management literature, Austrian economics, and management science.

This disturbing trend is not unique to the marketing discipline. Fragmentation of the business disciplines and proliferation of an ever-growing number of specialized research topics and journals are partly responsible. The marketing education process certainly shares part of the blame, as will be shown.