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Marketing Metrics to the American Public: An Interview with Dr. Eugene Laczniak

Interview Conducted by V. Mickevicius



“Realistically, a major role for government is a must.”

One of the major problems confronting the metrication movement is the general lack of publicity and public awareness of the scope of the metric system. The work already performed as well as that still needed to be done to bring metrication to fruition needs considerable attention. The application of marketing principles and programs can have a potentially great effect

on the success of the work of metric activists. During the course of this interview, conducted in late November, 1977, Dr. Eugene Laczniak suggests some of the ways in which marketing can be made to work for metrication; and he offers vital insights into the means by which metrication can become a fixed reality in American life, business, industry, government, and education.

- Q.** To be as blunt as possible here at the outset, can metrication be sold to the American public?
- A.** In the long run, the public can't be *sold* anything that it doesn't want or need. However, the concept of metrication can be *marketed* to the American public if the public is convinced that the idea of metrics will benefit them. Good marketing begins with the premise that benefits to the consumer have to be clear-cut and well-publicized.
- Q.** Alright, then, one of the major problems found in metrication is the *idea* of the metric system. Some people don't know much about it; others hate it; while a good number of people are staunch supporters. From a marketing standpoint, how can the idea of "promoting" metrication be best approached?
- A.** Your question contains a clue to the answer. Good marketing practice requires that the total intended audience — the American public — be divided into market *segments*. So, in fact, what you have is a small segment of people in favor of metrics, a small segment against it, and a very large one not even aware of the issue. A different message has to be formulated for each group. The unaware must be educated regarding the concept of metrication. The skeptics must be converted.

The proponents must be encouraged to spread their positive views about metrication.

- Q. In marketing metrics, should distinctions be made between the ordinary consumer and the industrial user of metric products?
- A. Absolutely. Each of these two groups receives a different, but related, set of benefits by "going metric." Without delving too deeply into it, the advantages in the long run are more immediate for the industrial user. In an increasingly integrated world economic market, it only makes sense that American business firms have the same set of weights and measures that the rest of the world business community uses. It makes buying and selling much easier. With regard to consumers, the use of metrication is essentially an appeal to logic. Our customary system of measurement is purely nominal — a set of measures based on tradition. Metrics, of course, have the internal mathematical logic of being a base-ten system. The point is that selling metrics to the industrial user is much easier than marketing it to the average consumer.
- Q. What role, if any, can consumer education or employee training play in marketing or advertising metrication?
- A. Both things would be important to any integrated program of marketing the concept of metrication. Mass *employee training* would be a bit easier to achieve because part of being an employee requires learning things related to your job. So, if your supervisor says that from now on all measurement aspects of your job function will be computed in metrics, the typical employee will learn metrics — or at least certain aspects of the system — rather quickly. *Consumer education* would also probably be pretty important to any successful program of metric marketing. But a large scale effort to educate the public would be difficult at best. Metrication is what sociologists and marketers refer to as a *discontinuous innovation*. Discontinuous innovations are concepts which require people to learn some new behavior. And most people simply don't like to learn new things. Innovations which are *continuous* are easier to market than the *discontinuous* kind. For example, the switch from a dial to a push button phone is continuous because the needed change in behavior is minimal. But the implementation of metrics means learning a new weight and measurement system; people will resist this because learning is hard work.
- Q. Sounds bleak. Is it necessary for government to play a role, along with the private sector, in any attempts to promote metrication on a national level?
- A. Realistically, a major role for government is a must. With something like 25% of the people in this country not even knowing what metrics are, hard conversion is unrealistic without a coordinated communications program about conversion which is supported at the highest levels of the federal government. The nomination of the U.S. Metric Board is a step in the right direction, but it will have to move soon with authority, shortly after its members are confirmed by the Senate. A mass marketing program is part of the answer. In a country where a 50% turnout of voters on election day is considered to be impressive, a lot of persuasion will be needed to get the American public to learn the metric system.
- Q. What sort of marketing methods might be valuable?
- A. It's hard to say for sure. Few mass education programs of this kind have been attempted before in the U.S. Probably, the first step is to undertake some basic marketing research to determine what demographic and life-style characteristics separate those individuals who favor metrics from those who oppose it and those who are unaware or indifferent. Knowing the individual characteristics of these groups will make it easier for the proponents of metrication to communicate with their target audience. For example, suppose part of the research shows that there is a very low tolerance for metrication among individuals who are over age 50, live in rural areas, like to save their money, and do not have college degrees. This information provides a reasonably good target profile upon which tailored messages advocating metrics can be formulated and appropriated media selected for reaching this group. Specific communication goals will have to be formulated, and the government will have to budget the money to make this kind of program work.
- Q. How will metrication affect the typical business firm? How does a firm go about marketing its metric products?
- A. Once again, it's necessary to divide things up a bit. First, let's talk about the industrial firm selling primarily to other industries. The major cost of metrication to the producer will be a one-time change over cost. In the case of the manufacturer, certain machinery will have to be retooled or reset; specifications, operating manuals and the like will have to be readjusted. Marketing these products to other business firms should not be all that difficult because organizations use buying specialists such as purchasing agents and buying committees whose role is to be knowledgeable and make complex evaluations. Many of these

persons are already familiar with the metric system because a substantial number of the products they buy are dimensioned metrically.

Q. And companies selling to the average consumer?

A. Initially, marketing products dimensioned in metrics will be a real challenge. This is why a major government sponsored communication campaign to make the public aware of and favorable to metrics is so vitally important. Today, the average consumer will face their first exposure to metrics in the supermarket or the department store. Milk bottles graduated in *litres*, cake mix weighted in *grams* and clothing sizes measured in *centimeters* will bewilder the typical American at first. Producers and retailers selling to the general public will have to spend a lot of time and money designing signs, cards, pamphlets, brochures and other aids to help in the conversion effort and educate the public. Most everyone — except, perhaps, the schoolchildren who have been weaned on metrics — will be walking around with a little conversion card to crib from. Advertisers will have to march out every possible advantage and even some improbable ones to make the conversion a success.

Q. If the change will be so difficult, are there marketing advantages to be gained from "soft" rather than "hard" conversion?

A. Not in the long term. With soft conversion things pretty much stay as they are. Marketing would change little. Consumers will continue to use the customary system's equivalent measure to reference the things they need. Few Americans will learn metrics just because most labels, packages, and signs have dual demarcations.

Q. One last question, then. Without a government sponsored program of marketing research and communications, how long might it take before metrication becomes a reality in our daily lives?

A. Not until our children, who are being educated to "think metric," become adults and members of the ruling class. Obviously, we can't afford to wait this long. This is why the government, under the guidance of the U.S. Metric Board, must take a marketing approach to metric conversion. Segments of the American public must be profiled. Messages must be created which point out the benefits of metrication to these groups. Communication goals for each segment need to be specified, and funds will have to be budgeted either to do the task directly or to coordinate the efforts of the private sector in this regard.

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