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## **The Mental Footprint of Marketing in the Boardroom**

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## **Abstract**

**Purpose:** Marketing researchers continue to debate the significance of the managerial relevance of marketing, especially in the boardrooms. Despite a growing number of published papers on the topic, it is surprising that there are virtually none on mental models.

**Approach:** The paper presents mental models as a perspective to discuss marketing's position in companies, and reflects on the marketing mental models of boardroom members and top management.

**Findings:** The paper addresses marketing's relevant issues and offers new insights into the role of marketing in companies by highlighting mental models, which drive the boardrooms' and managers' attentions, decisions, actions, and evaluations. The paper demonstrates the importance of mental models by introducing and discussing the notion of the *mental footprint of marketing*, or the impact marketing has on mental models.

**Research implications:** The rapidly changing business environment, in addition to current marketing research trends, strengthens the need to understand the scope of issues included under the notion of marketing, as well as the overall significance of marketing within the company. The paper advocates that understanding and investigating mental models is useful in these endeavours.

**Practical implications:** The paper presents a set of different implications from recognised mental models in companies.

**Originality/value of paper:** This paper contributes to discussions on the relevance of marketing in modern companies by introducing a new perspective, involving the mental footprint of marketing, which challenges functional points of view. If the mental model of marketing takes a broader approach, considering marketing to be ubiquitous, then marketing can be seen as being present in the boardroom.

**Category:** Research paper

**Keywords:** Mental model, Marketing mindset, Managerial decision making, Marketing management, Board of directors, Boardroom, Marketing's managerial relevance, Ubiquitous marketing

## **The Mental Footprint of Marketing in the Boardroom**

### **Introduction**

Although marketing has undergone many transformations in practice and in academic research, there seems to be continuous concern about its relevance (Day, 1992; Brown, 2005; Sheth and Sisodia, 2006; Reibstein *et al.*, 2009; Jaworski 2011). Several academic researchers have proposed that there is a need for a new mental model of marketing, in industrial marketing (Wind, 2006a, 2006b; Ford, 2011), relationship marketing (Grönroos, 2006), service marketing (Vargo and Lusch, 2011), and sustainability research (Kotler, 2011), because the business environment has changed, making the established mental models obsolete. As the business environment continues to quickly evolve, the concern for marketing's position escalates. Besides a possible misalignment of academic research in marketing within current needs, there also claims to be a gap in practical relevance. Many marketing researchers have noticed the limited relevance of marketing in boardrooms and the need to revitalize this (e.g. McDonald, 2006; Wind, 2006b; Klaus *et al.*, forthcoming; Wirtz *et al.*, forthcoming).

Marketing's role in the boardroom can, however, be approached in two different ways. One approach involves considering marketing as one function among many in a company, and exploring the relative influence of marketing on strategic decision-making (cf. Verhoef and Leeflang, 2009; Nath and Mahajan, 2011; Verhoef *et al.*, 2011). We take the holistic perspective, which suggests that marketing is at the core of corporate strategy and business models (cf. Drucker, 1993; Ambler, 2000; Brown, 2005; Ambler and Roberts, 2008). Ambler (2000; Ambler and Roberts, 2008) proposes that companies should apply the holistic or "pan-company" view of marketing in the boardroom, and that their members' attention should be directed to two issues:

the origin of cash flow and the company's brand equity as a marketing asset. However, he finds that this might not actually be the case in most companies.

Following Wind's (2006a, 2006b) line of thought that practitioners' and academics' mental models of marketing play an important part in understanding marketing's relevance dilemma, in this paper, we focus on how marketing is understood in academic research and marketing practice. A mental model in a business setting is defined here as a shared cognitive belief system held by a key actor (individual, team, company) that is of significance because it filters managers' attentions and guides the company's decisions and behavior. A key issue is: even if not always formally defined, what is marketing seen to be? We take a particular interest in reflecting on the perspectives of non-marketing boardroom members and top executives on marketing. This is a significant issue in practice since it affects the scope of issues included under the notion of marketing, in addition to the overall significance of marketing within the company. We explore the *mental footprint of marketing*, or the impact marketing has on mental models in the company. Focusing on managers' and decision makers' mental models is relevant as these drive managers' attentions, decisions, actions, and evaluations (cf. Prahalad and Bettis, 1986; Kohli and Jaworski, 1990; Day and Nedungadi, 1994; Normann, 2001).

The academic literature has continuously attempted to create formal definitions of marketing, evolving over time as society and business conditions change (cf. AMA's definitions of marketing). The academic debate has witnessed many shifts in thinking, so-called 'paradigm' shifts, where new perspectives have been introduced. These often contrast the old with the new thinking, creating normative suggestions of how marketing should be seen and conducted. They

have broadly covered an extension of scope from a focus on transactions, to service episodes, to customer relationships, to networks of relationships, and further on, to embeddedness in the society. Adoption of such fundamentally new mental models in a company will not happen quickly or easily, and will affect both the organization itself and other parties, causing market dynamics. At the same time, businesses have their own ‘paradigms’ and practices concerning marketing; what it is, stated explicitly or implicitly, how it is organized, how it is conducted, and how results are measured. These ‘theories-in-use’ (i.e. managers’ mental models about marketing), are parallel to the academic debate and research, but have not been empirically studied to any larger extent (Jaworski, 2011).

In this paper, we first present some key issues in the debate about marketing’s position, role, and challenges. Thereafter, we introduce mental models as a perspective to structure further discussion in this paper. We then present a two-dimensional model that is used to characterize mental models of boardrooms. The last section presents conclusions that show that there may be significant consequences for how a company is managed depending on how marketing is understood in the boardroom. In essence we contribute by suggesting that mental models of marketing need to be recognized in practice and as an academic research issue. Furthermore, we suggest that if marketing is considered ubiquitous then it supports the company’s business model development and offering innovation in a customer-centric way. Also, if marketing is seen as revenue management marketing then it will automatically be considered strategically important. The paper concludes with suggestions for further research on mental models.

### **Mental models as the perspective**

Normann (2001) considers the fundamental process of leadership to be “interpreting a continuously evolving context, formulating our notions of our own identity and the emerging new contextual logic into a set of ‘dominating ideas’, which are both descriptive and normative, and then translate these dominating ideas into various realms of action” (p. 3). Teece (2010), reflecting on business model development, stresses the importance of managers’ mental models (hypotheses) about fundamental issues: “It [the business model] thus reflects management’s hypothesis about what customers want, how they want it, and how the enterprise can organize to best meet those needs, get paid for doing so, and make a profit” (Teece, 2010, p. 172).

Jaworski’s (2011) similar view on the relevance of mental models is “. . . the majority of senior marketing executives have deeply rooted, strongly held ‘theories-in-use’ about how their world works. . . . Furthermore, these belief systems are based on years of work experience, failures and successes, interactions with other executives, and observations of innovations in the industry” (p. 220). We extend this as well as Prahalad and Bettis’s (1986) notion of the dominant general management logical claim that it is not only senior marketing executives’ views about marketing that are important, but that non-marketing executives’ and board members’ mental models of marketing are also important. Welch and Wilkinson (2002) have called for more research to identify and measure key dimensions of the mental models used by firms to understand their relations and networks in a business marketing context. One such study by Storbacka and Nenonen (2011) explores implications of considering markets as socially constructed. There are only a few studies on marketing managers’ mental models (Day, 1992; Tollin, 2008; Tollin and Jones, 2009), but to the best of our knowledge none about non-marketers’ marketing logics.

Managerial decision making in marketing, in general, has recently started to capture the attentions of academia. Wierenga (2011), a prominent scholar in the subfield of marketing decision making and marketing modeling, concludes that despite data, information, and sophisticated models, “in the end, it is the marketing decision maker who has to evaluate the alternatives, judge the evidence and uncertainties, and decide on the marketing policy and marketing instruments” (p. 89). Based on an extensive literature review, Wierenga concludes that very little is known about these issues.

In the next section, we review the literature to identify some of the frequently expressed concerns regarding marketing’s position and role in companies. These concerns can be interpreted as potential explanations for marketing’s limited footprint in the boardroom.

### **Concerns about marketing’s position in companies**

Many studies about marketing’s position and role look at marketing as a *function* (department) alongside other functions within the company. Next, we identify some of the major concerns related to this view, but also some suggestions for alternative views.

#### Marketing does not address top management concerns

Summarizing the ongoing academic debate about marketing’s position or ‘marketing’s great identity crisis,’ Brooksbank *et al.* (2010) suggest that marketing practitioners and academics alike seem to have forgotten marketing’s strategic dimensions. Wind (2006a, p. 477) commented that marketing does not address top level management’s concerns of return of investment in marketing and how marketing can be a driver of growth. Others have also expressed similar

concerns (cf. Day, 1992; Grönroos 2003; McDonald 2006). Day (1992), for example, comments on marketing's role in company strategizing; marketers assume that marketing should play a leading role, but other business functions and academic disciplines disagree. Marketing's role in strategic development is dependent on what is meant by marketing: a general management responsibility, an organizational orientation, or a distinct function (Day, 1992, p. 323). Day (1992) refers to McKenna (1991, p. 68) who defined marketing as everything and where everything is marketing, and suggested that marketing is not a function, but rather a way of doing business.

#### Academic Marketing has the wrong focus and low managerial relevance

Academic researchers' mental model of marketing is too narrow and not adapted to changing business environments (Wind, 2006a). Jaworski (2011) addresses the issue of how academic marketing knowledge is perceived by (marketing) managers. He concludes that relevance depends on the manager's role and position in the organization, implying that academic researchers need to understand not only the content of marketing practitioners' roles, but also their job tasks in practice. He suggests that academic knowledge is not aligned to practitioners' perspectives and is too generic, which creates the relevance gap.

#### Company-wide customer centricity is hard to achieve in practice

Customer centricity is claimed to be a cornerstone of marketing and business, but in practice it is hard to achieve (e.g. Shah *et al.*, 2006; Osborne and Ballantyne, 2012; Payne and Frow, forthcoming). Shah *et al.* (2006) discuss marketing as a company orientation and focus on the challenges of implementing customer centricity in companies, even if this has been on the



agenda for over 50 years. They stress the importance of leadership commitment, implying customer centrality as an element of managers' mental models. Grönroos (2003) suggests that mainstream marketing (the marketing mix approach) is not as focused on customers as it should be, and is too focused on marketing as a function. Taking a relationship-marketing perspective and putting customers in focus increases marketing's relevance for the boardroom as then "marketing is to invest in customers and customer portfolios to get wanted long-term cash flows from them" (p. 172).

#### Marketing accountability is required

Marketing accountability is similar to the "measurement business" used by McDonald (2006) who criticizes the focus of measuring the effects of promotional campaigns, which neglect to develop measures that are relevant to companies where the customer is at the center of the business model. There are numerous studies dealing with marketing accountability (the extent to which marketing activities and expenditures account for financial and non-financial performance metrics), and marketing legitimacy (stakeholders' opinions that the actions of the marketing entity are desirable and appropriate) in terms of the influence of the marketing department inside the company (e.g. Verhoef and Leeflang, 2009; Merlo and Auh, 2010; O'Sullivan and Butler, 2010; Nath and Mahajan, 2011; Verhoef *et al.*, 2011). O'Sullivan and Butler (2010) found that practitioners applied a functional view on marketing rather than an orientation view. Frösén *et al.* (2013) found five different 'styles' of marketing metrics, ranging from the minimum use of metrics to using an extensive set of measures and focusing on different sets of measures. This finding can be interpreted as differences in the underlying mental model of marketing accountability in the companies and reflects differences in company contexts.

## **Analysis of mental models**

Underlying the discussion in the literature is an explicit or implicit mental model of what marketing is considered to be. This understanding has changed over the years among academic researchers, observed in the debate about paradigm shifts and changing suggested definitions of marketing. Mental models of marketing can be structured around two chief dimensions, reflecting the two most salient elements in the models—managerial scope and managerial focus, as depicted in Figure 1. First, the managerial scope on how marketing is seen can be either a strategic or a functional issue, indicating a broad or narrow view, respectively. Second, as the other fundamental dimension, the focus can be on issues related to the company itself or the customers. Using these dimensions, the figure distinguishes and illustrates four subsequent different prototypical mental models with key questions that dominate each boardroom in which they are found. One mental model of marketing typically leads to questions of how well offerings have been sold and how sales can be increased (A). Another model is to have a broader but still internal view, and discuss marketing in terms of how making and selling the company’s offerings can increase its profitability and profit possibilities (B). This view gives marketing a more strategic view, including concerns for innovations, customer relationships, and partners. A third model is to emphasize marketing as adjustments and customization of offerings (C). A fourth model places marketing at the strategic customer-focused level with the question “How can we offer something customers will buy?” (D). The footprint of marketing is different in each situation.

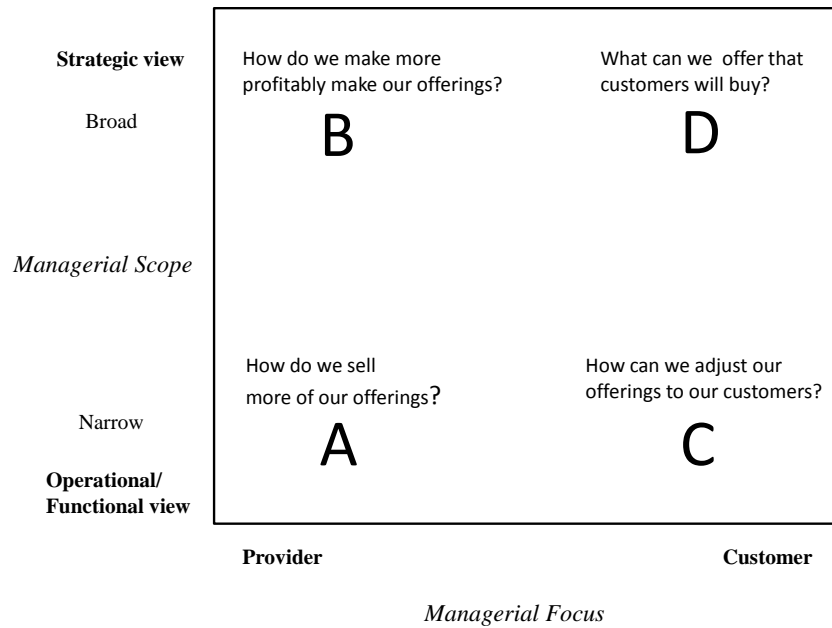


Figure 1. Mental models of marketing in boardrooms exemplified by core questions

The concerns raised in the literature mostly consider, either explicitly or implicitly, marketing as a function of models A and C. The issue in these becomes to influence top management by convincing non-marketing executives and the boardroom that marketing costs are productive. This narrow view of marketing can be contrasted with the broader perspective that marketing is an orientation, or more advanced, the foundation for business (cf. Drucker, 1993). In that case, marketing is not understood only as it is currently in companies, but also as what it can become. The mental model D would represent this perspective in a dynamic business environment. Next we discuss what such a stance implies.

### **Implications**

A mental model of marketing in this paper is defined as a cognitive belief structure that influences how different issues are understood and acted upon. It should also be noted that

marketing in practice is based on mental models, irrespective of whether it is recognized or studied as such. This paper suggests that changing the mental model of what marketing is, from a management point of view, gives new perspectives on the challenges presented in the literature and on how the mental footprint of marketing can be influenced. We propose four “what-if” questions that challenge current thinking, asking what if marketing is seen as a mental model, is ubiquitous, is considered in terms of revenue management, and as a term hinders changing prevailing mental models. These questions represent key aspects that act as the foundation for considering marketing as the core of corporate strategy. When accepted, they represent characteristics of the mental model D, captured in Figure 1 as “What can we offer that customers will buy?”

1. Marketing is essentially a mental model.

Our most important assertion in this paper is that attention should be paid to mindsets and mental models. In the literature, it is sometimes explicitly, but often implicitly, stressed that actors’ mental models are important. We suggest that by understanding managers’ and other actors’ mental model of marketing, many issues will be seen in a different light. Members from top management teams probably have the most different mental models of marketing, and revealing these may enhance the discussion at this level. A research implication from this is to not only study marketing mental models of managers, but also board members and top management, individually as well as in groups/teams.

The interest in how mental models drive marketing transcends to the customers’ and partners’ mental models of value/offering/need (Strandvik *et al.*, 2012), and the decision makers’

mental model of what constitutes markets, opportunities, and threats. In practice, in order to understand differences in mental models, it is useful to explain actions and decisions; this will also instill and develop mental models in the company. A superior mental model may be a hidden competitive advantage in the market place. For academic marketing research, this approach would represent a vast field for research, indicated as important by many in the debate.

A mental footprint refers to how marketing is presented and practiced, and the impression and impact marketing makes on a particular company. A key point here is that marketing need not be called “marketing” in order to be marketing. On the other hand, when marketing is understood as “marketing” in the traditional sense, certain well-described issues arise. This refers to explicit as well as implicit aspects, and can range from as narrow to the broadest views of the company. A broad view would imply that marketing is always present in boardroom discussions, even though the term itself may not be used. One diagnostic starting point is to challenge the mental model of marketing in order to see marketing in a different way. Instead of seeing marketing mainly as costs and fuzzy investments, marketing can be seen as the revenue generator. Switching the perspective can be compared with the transition in the well-known fairy tale, *The Frog Prince*, by the Brothers Grimm, in which a princess reluctantly befriends a frog who magically transforms into a handsome prince.

The metaphors “frog marketing” and “prince marketing” illustrate the differences between two opposite ways of seeing marketing, as an insignificant or “ugly” frog, or as an important and “handsome,” prince. In the case of frog marketing, which is the most common among companies, marketing is regarded as more or less equivalent to the marketing functions of

advertising and communication, and marketing cost monitoring tends to have marginal relevance to boardroom-level discussions. In the case of prince marketing, marketing is seen in a different way, in line with what the paper presents, as permeating the whole company and all of its actions and decision, as ubiquitous, and as involving revenue management, and thus relevant for boardrooms. This fairy tale metaphor also depicts the transformation of marketing in a company as a drastic process, involving substantial changes in its fundamental nature and mental footprint of marketing. The limited mental footprint may, in fact, be more extensive than expected, and could potentially be significantly increased by redefining what marketing means in the company.

## 2. Marketing is ubiquitous.

As long as marketing is seen as a business *function*, the issue that it is not represented in the boardroom may be valid. However, if the mental model of marketing is changed to the broad view suggested here, to consider marketing to be *ubiquitous*, marketing is already present in the boardroom, but disguised. The challenge then becomes that marketing issues are not recognized, and decisions are made without considering that they are partly marketing. The real concern is not to bring marketing into the boardroom, but to be able to identify marketing aspects of any decision and activity in the boardroom and elsewhere. To change the current mental models, a practical problem is that the very term “marketing” and the whole vocabulary presently used support the narrow view. Academic marketing thinking is not easily translated to managerial practice because it does not provide tools to convert idealistic principles into practice. The key issue concerning practice, and research to put mental models on the agenda, reveal and question this (cf. Brown, 2005).

Companies may believe they are customer-oriented because they use the term, but in reality their practices do not support it (Fellsson, 2011). The context shapes what is done in practice and how the “customer concept” is translated into practice. Companies may not consider customers important because they think that they ‘own’ them, they have contracts, and assume that yesterday’s customers will remain tomorrow’s customers. Even the practice of calculating customer lifetime value (CLV) rests on the idea that the critical factor is not whether customers will stay, but the interest rate. But the dynamic business environment of today is something different, and many dominating companies fail. Companies may not appreciate marketing because it is understood as *Frog Marketing*, costly but not an investment. Customers are not seen as what they are; the only revenue source in a business sense. Even when considered an investment, it is not understood that marketing is not a specific activity; marketing is ubiquitous, marketing is everywhere, it is “the soul of the corporation.” (Fellsson, 2011, p. 231 referring to Deleuze)

If it is accepted that marketing is ubiquitous, then marketing is not only performed by the companies’ marketing departments (function). Neither is marketing everyone’s job, nor an issue that everyone be considered part-time marketers. The challenge is that marketing is potentially present in any issue, and the key task is to evaluate how important each issue is from a marketing point of view. What is the marketing impact of hiring a new human resources (HR) manager? What is the marketing impact of investing in new facilities? What is the marketing impact of investing in a customer relationship management (CRM) system and so on? Such a review may reveal that important marketing decisions and activities are located

where they have not been recognized earlier. The ubiquitous marketing approach is probably not achievable by increasing co-operation and linkages between current business functions as such, and the marketing function cannot take the lead in a change process as it is a question of shifting mental models. It is initially an issue for the top management.

### 3. Marketing is revenue management.

In a business setting, marketing can be defined as revenue management. Marketing seen as revenue management implies that all activities and decisions that influence and secure current and future revenue streams represent marketing (cf. Ambler, 2000; Ambler and Roberts, 2008).

As all revenue is generated from customers, there is no business without customers.

Consequently, marketing is about offering something that customers are willing to buy.

Marketing is not about selling; it is about making purchasing easy. This view puts the customer in the foreground; the customer is the most important stakeholder for the company, as suggested originally 1954 by Peter Drucker “What the customer thinks he or she is buying, what he or she considers value is decisive – it determines what a business is, what it produces, and whether it will prosper” (Drucker, 1993, p. 37).

It should be noted that this is not merely reiterating the suggestion that companies should be market- or customer-oriented. It is taking the idea of orientation one step further in the sense that it focuses on the mental models, ‘theories-in-use’, and mindsets first of the top management team and boardroom of the company, but also elsewhere in the organization and in the company’s network. Society, technology, and market conditions change continuously; consequently, customers change, requiring a constant adaptation of the company’s mental



models about marketing. It is not only a question of understanding customers' needs and wants and how they perceive current offerings or company activities, but rather to realize how customers' experiences, activities, and logic are embedded in and influenced by their changing context (Heinonen *et al.*, 2010).

If marketing as a mental model is broadened and seen as management of revenue streams, it becomes the most important issue in the firm. Marketing consequently becomes a strategic issue that raises fundamental questions, such as how to define our market, manage revenue streams, and decipher customer logic. Revenue management issues end up in the boardroom, whereas function-level issues do not. Basically, marketing as a function-level issue, is concerned with the question of how to sell products more effectively, whereas marketing as a revenue management issue is concerned with how to offer something that customers will buy. Marketing seen as revenue management is also completely in line with Sheth and Sisodia's (2006) suggestion that "dumb" marketing should be avoided.

Marketing as a theoretical concept has many meanings, and these meanings have changed over the years. More significant shifts in thinking are often labeled 'paradigm shifts,' such as shifts from a marketing mix perspective to a services perspective or relationship perspective, from a dyadic relationship perspective to a network perspective, or from a services perspective to a service perspective. In essence, the scope of marketing has continuously widened and become externalized from the company's own domain and direct control. As a consequence, marketing is more and more per definition envisioned as the foundation for the company's business. Paradoxically, this connects to Drucker's ideas of fifty years ago.

#### 4. Marketing as a term hinders changing prevailing mental models.

Accepting a mental model of marketing, according to which marketing as a concept or phenomenon is considered revenue management and ubiquitous in the firm and in the boardroom, creates a terminology problem. In the current mental model, marketing firmly means the marketing function and is not cognitively associated with a broad view of marketing. We argue that this broad view of marketing will bring it to boardroom agendas. This is clearly illustrated by the case reported by Brown (2005). Commercially responsible top-line executives of four major firms discussed how care for their firms' customers to effectively manage revenues. According to Brown, when discussing customer issues, none mentioned marketing. However, the role of a range of other business functions was frequently mentioned. In our opinion, this mental model is common in practice, as well as reflected in much of marketing research.

In a relationship-marketing context, Grönroos (1999) argued over a decade ago that marketing as a term is ill suited to describe the marketing context that had been emerging. Over the past 15 years, it seems as if the dilemma with the term marketing has only grown. To enable a broadening of the mental footprint of marketing in the boardroom, which we advocate, we argue that the term marketing is an obstacle that might have to be removed. The term marketing has become problematic for the phenomenon of marketing. It is not only time to reinvent the mental model of marketing; the term itself must be reinvented.

## **Conclusion**

The paper argues that if a wider (modern) customer-driven understanding of marketing is embraced in a firm, marketing's role in the strategy process and in the boardroom would be easily recognized. The reasons for highlighting mental models in companies and the boardroom setting are numerous. First, ethical issues and customer views matter and there are many examples of how companies recently ran into major trouble when customer concerns and reactions were not considered at the highest company level. Second, the development of business happens through the development of business models and logics, which is the task of the board and not the company's. Thus, marketing needs to permeate the whole company and not be isolated inside departments. Third, the mental model of the business logic of the company held by the board will impact most strategic choices and priorities, as well as the tactical activities of the firm. Fourth, mental models in the mental footprint are difficult to change. They are manifested in systems, organizations, and measurement operations. In order to change and innovate, ways to diagnose mental models are needed.

### **Further research**

As this paper is conceptual and presents the new notion of the mental footprint of marketing, an obvious avenue for further research involves empirical examination. It would first of all be interesting to explore how board members and top management define and view marketing and its roles in reality. What individual and group marketing mental models exist? Could the situations outlined in Figure 1 be found in reality and how would they manifest themselves in boardroom discussions? What additional core issues would be relevant in the D-situation when marketing is seen as ubiquitous? How are the marketing mental models concretized, in terms of being revealed in fundamental business tasks such as strategic decision-making and business

development? Moreover, what opportunities for developing new business would be apparent to a company that regards marketing as revenue management? Selecting situations that contain challenges for coping in changing contexts or comparing recession and boom times would be especially revealing, with regard to mental marketing models. Comparing the mental footprints of marketing among companies in the same line of business could be another approach, as this would reveal potentially parallel mental models.

Mental models exist within the mind, and are unavailable for direct observation. Retrieving them is a challenge, particularly as there are no established measurement tools and techniques. Inductive and abductive approaches, ethnographical methods, and prolonged involvement, together with narrative and content analysis could be recommended approaches for gaining a fuller understanding of mental models. However, sensitivity is required on the part of researchers, as access presents a practical challenge and boardroom discussions typically involve confidential information.

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