

“Is there a gap in the market, and is there a market in the gap?” – How advertising planning performs markets

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Abstract

This paper explores the performative role of marketing knowledge in advertising planning. It is based on an ethnography within the account planning department of a London advertising agency as it worked closely with a client and a market research agency to develop a new energy/health drink for launch in the UK. The case provides detailed support for the idea that marketing (and other) theories help perform or bring into existence that which they purport to describe. It also shows how such theories are hybridised and streamlined in the iterative battleground of a creative process, framed by the need to create plausible consumption and competitive relations. The main contribution of this paper is to show how the performative power of marketing knowledge is ultimately determined not by its 'truth value', but by its ability to produce compelling stories that stabilize the reflexive relationships between product attributes, consumer profiles and competitive relations.

Keywords

Performativity; market creation; advertising planning; positioning; ethnography

Introduction

Market Leader is the in-house magazine of The Marketing Society, a leading association of senior marketers in the UK. In the January edition of 2010, it carried a column penned by Rory Sutherland, then vice chairman of the Ogilvy Group UK and newly installed chairman of the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising (IPA). Sutherland (2010, p. 48) wrote:

If there is one thing more dishonest than dodgy marketing, it is the pretence that marketing raises no ethical concerns. The truth is that marketing raises enormous ethical questions every day – at least it does if you are doing it right. If this were not the case, the only possible explanations are either that you believe marketers are too ineffectual to make any difference, or you believe that marketing activities only affect people at the level of conscious argument. Neither of these possibilities appeals to me. I would rather be thought of as evil than useless.

The views expressed by Sutherland, however controversial, paint a picture in which marketing activities have consequences, ethical and otherwise. This view can be broadly characterised as following a performative rather than a representational idiom (Pickering, 1994). In this view, marketing knowledge does not simply reflect an existing reality, it helps enact realities. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the development of a performative idiom in marketing. The use of performative approaches in management has grown apace over the last decade, fuelled by Callon's (1998) notion that economics, broadly conceived, is actively involved in shaping the economy, and Mackenzie's (2006, 2009) exemplary studies of finance.

In marketing, the growing interest in practice-based perspectives has extended to the performativity of marketing knowledge (Kjellberg & Helgesson, 2006; Araujo, Finch, & Kjellberg, 2010; Zwick & Cayla, 2011). But, whilst marketing academia has spent considerable energy researching the demand side of markets, it has devoted comparatively few resources to understanding the world of professional marketers. As Zwick and Cayla (2011, p. 4) aptly remarked: "The visibility of marketing activities contrasts with the relative obscurity of the inner workings of the marketing profession." Or, to follow Cochoy (2011), marketing has for too long neglected the world of 'marketer research'. To be able to say something about the performativity of marketing requires a closer look at how marketing professionals go about their daily practices and what type of knowledge is mobilised in these practices.

In short, the aim of this paper is to contribute to the nascent programme of 'marketer research' by investigating the practices of advertising planners and the performativity of marketing knowledge in this context. Advertising planners are at the cross-roads of different relationships both within and outside advertising agencies, with the role involving mediation between clients, account executives,

creatives, market researchers, final consumers and so on (Hackley, 2003 a,b; Grant & MacLeod, 2007). Most of the research on advertising planners has focused on classifying and explicating the roles advertising planners fulfil and how these roles have evolved over time, rather than on the types of knowledge and skills mobilised to perform these roles. Similarly, ethnographies of advertising agencies (see e.g. Hennion, Méadel, & Bowker, 1989; Moeran, 1996; Maleyft & Moeran, 2003) have shed little light on the mediating roles of advertising planners and the forms of knowledge invoked in their daily practices. This paper attempts to address this gap by focusing on advertising planners and their interactions with clients and external agencies during the development of a creative brief. By following a single project, we focus on what forms of marketing knowledge were invoked at different junctions of the project, and describe the work performed by this knowledge in moving the project forward.

The paper is structured as follows: the second section provides a review of the performativity literature. The third section describes the methodological details of the ethnography of advertising planners conducted by the first author. The fourth section provides a detailed account of the work involved in planning a campaign for a new product, a functional soft drink. The description of the project emphasises the pivotal moments in the elaboration of a proposition by the team that developed a communications strategy that could be passed on to the creative team. The fifth section provides a discussion of our empirical case whilst the final section provides some concluding comments and reflections on the question 'what does it mean to say marketing is performative?'

Performing Market(ing)

Our first task is to establish how performativity adds to the long-standing debate on how marketing theory and practice are or should be related. Variously construed as the 'theory-practice gap', the 'academic-practitioner divide' or, more recently, the 'relevance' debate, marketing academia has frequently worried about its links to practitioners. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a review of this literature, we briefly address two key arguments here.

The link between theory and practice is often couched in terms of academic knowledge's impact on firm performance (Brownlie, Hewer, & Ferguson, 2007). A number of authors have exposed differences in values between academia and practice (Brennan, 2004), suggested theory-practice bridges in the guise of marketing engineering (Lilien, Rangaswamy, van Bruggen, & Wierenga, 2002), or even challenged the notion that practitioners can learn from academia (November, 2004). Secondly, the relationship of theory to practice is often regarded as a one way transfer, namely how scientific knowledge penetrates the world of practice (Cornelissen & Lock, 2005). The concern here

is as much with use as non-use, as well as the identification of gaps between practitioners' 'theories-in-use' and the latest scientific knowledge (Zaltman, LeMasters, & Heffring, 1982).

Paradoxically, this literature ignores a parallel debate on the history of the social sciences and, in particular, what Latour (1996) calls 'performative sciences' or sciences that emerge *in* and *through* practice. Hacking (1986) suggests that the social sciences elaborate classifications that create new categories of people that did not exist before – i.e. they 'make up' their own subjects. In addition, classifications affect how these subjects behave which, in turn, changes the classifications themselves. This is what Hacking (1995, p. 369) called looping effects: "To create new ways of classifying people is also to change how we can think of ourselves, to change our sense of self-worth, even how we remember our past. This in turn generates a looping effect, because people of the kind behave differently and so are different". Espeland and Sauder's (2007) study of the effects of the rankings of US law schools illustrates this feedback effect, as people and institutions change their behaviour in reaction to being observed, measured and ranked. These looping effects can have important consequences for practice, as when management or economic theories embodying particular values guide the conduct of managerial elites (Ghoshal & Moran, 1996; Ferraro, Pfeffer, & Sutton, 2005; Ghoshal, 2005).

Examples of 'making up' subjects and looping effects abound in management studies. Miller (1994) describes how the technologies of accountancy seek to produce individuals who come to act as self-regulating, calculating persons within particular calculable spaces such as enterprises and organisations. Miller and Rose (1997) show how psychological expertise helped 'make up' the subject of consumption in post-war Britain. The 'consumer' emerged as a problematic entity whose motivations and desires had to be charted in detail, and for whom consumption was enmeshed with a host of social practices. Heiskanen (2005) makes a more general point about how consumers are created through a variety of research methods from survey questionnaires to experimental set-ups.

Osborne and Rose (1999) examine how the notion of 'public opinion' was constructed through a series of tools and methods aimed at extracting opinions from representative samples through surveys. Phenomena such as 'public opinion' are products of the techniques, tools and bodies of knowledge that are mobilized to capture them. Igo (2007) portrays the emergence of survey research in the US as the progressive recalibration of collective and individual perceptions of society. Findings from surveys provided novel descriptions and classifications and, in doing so, came to serve as normative templates for living and changed individuals' perceptions of themselves and their place in society. Law (2009) describes how the Eurobarometer survey enacts a host of different realities other than European citizens' views on animal farm welfare.

Following in the same vein, Lezaun (2007) and Grandclément and Gaglio (2011) describe the focus group as a socio-material device to manufacture 'naturalistic' consumer opinions and to connect them with marketing strategies. Lee (2010) documents how Merton, Fisk, and Kendall's (1956) focused interview method reached market research and was transformed into a group interview, before being imported back into mainstream social science as the focus group. Law and Urry (2004, p. 393) characterise the performativity of methods as: "...they have effects; they make differences; they enact realities; and they can help bring into being what they also discover".

Hacking's (1985, 1996) arguments highlight the co-constitution of the social sciences and their subject matter or, put differently, how theory and methods help constitute their own ontologies. However, the feedback circuits that connect theory and methods and their subject matter are not clear. For Giddens (1987), the circuit of influence works via the import of theories and concepts into the mindsets of actors involved in the practices that theories represent in an epistemic sense. Ferraro et al. (2005) focus on the mechanisms (institutional design, social norms and language) through which theories become self-fulfilling, or create the conditions that make them 'true'. In other words, correspondences between theory and reality are not discovered but constructed (Breslau, 2013; Miller & Power, 2013).

The economic sociology pioneered by Callon (1998) incorporates these insights but takes us beyond the notion that theories change social practices mainly through the colonisation of actors' mindsets or language (Muniesa & Callon, 2008). Callon (1998, 2007) suggests that the economy does not exist, as an object of representation and intervention, before the elaboration and implementation of knowledge and expertise about the economy. This knowledge is the result of the ideas, methods, techniques, metrologies and so on, of professional economists and a whole host of other specialists (e.g. accountants, marketers, purchasers) who develop increasingly formalised knowledge as well as technical devices, which actively participate in shaping the economy (Mitchell, 2005; Porter, 2008). Thus, the economy is constituted not just by theories, models and methods, but also by material devices, embodied competencies, rules of conduct and so on. Put differently, the economy is the result of a whole set of distributed forms of expertise in which marketing often plays an important role – but only one role amongst many (Araujo & Kjellberg, 2009).

One important corollary of this approach is that the incorporation of theoretical notions into the conduct of actors occurs through multiple and often subtle routes. Regulatory structures, algorithms, material devices and so on, embodying particular theoretical principles, have the capacity to influence practices in ways other than through the performance of knowledgeable individuals. To paraphrase Vosselman (2013), disciplinary knowledge such as marketing is not

performative in the sense that experts, through compelling discursive strategies, aim to persuade others that their representations correspond to an actual or desired reality. Marketing is performative when it intervenes in the construction of actions and agencies, or what Callon (2008) calls *agencements*, through a range of socio-material practices.

Mackenzie (2006, 2007) illustrates how financial processes come to progressively resemble their depiction in theoretical models, through their incorporation in pricing algorithms to trade options, or what he calls Barnesian performativity. In this admittedly extreme example, the model comes to perform the world it purportedly describes through a very different route than those envisaged by Ferraro et al. (2005). Mackenzie (2006, 2007) suggests two other forms of performativity of greater interest to this paper. Generic performativity relates to how an aspect of economic theory is used by practitioners, regulators, policy makers and so on. The deployment of marketing discourse (e.g. segmentation, positioning) to describe or justify particular actions is a simple example of generic performativity. But, for a claim about performativity to become interesting, as Mackenzie (2007, p. 60) argues, an aspect of economics (e.g. a theoretical notion, model) must have a noticeable effect on processes in ways that an analogue process without the same influence would lead to different outcomes. This is what Mackenzie (2006, 2007) calls effective performativity.

However, identifying these conditions of effectiveness in the absence of controlled experiments is a tall order. Taylor (1985) argues that to test a theory in the human sciences does not mean checking how well the theory describes practices as independent entities. Rather, the effectiveness of a theory is judged by how well practices fare when informed by theory. Similarly, Isaac (2009) remarks that a theory's success is seldom measured by its generation of instrumental control, intrinsic power of persuasion or resilience in the face of falsification attempts. Instead, success is gauged by the theory's ability to embed itself in particular vectors of social practice (e.g. economics, politics). This raises the possibility of a gap between theoretical statements (what is said) and the socio-technical *agencements* that carry it (what is done) (Callon, 2008). However, efforts at performing the economy, in the face of competing attempts and the need to enlist and coordinate the efforts of others, are always liable to fail or misfire (Callon, 2010).

For Cochoy (1998, p. 195), marketing specialists played a key role in performing the market economy. This performance work involved four phases. In the first instance, marketing pioneers trained themselves in the empirical study of markets and performed the disciplinary training of similar specialists (performance through peer-formation). In a second phase, marketers devised conceptual frames to codify market knowledge and practice (performance through pre-formatting). In a third phase, marketers emboldened by their conceptual apparatus, techniques, disciplinary

narratives, and training programmes, enacted practices that came to be legitimised as knowledgeable marketing activities (what Cochoy calls performance as performance). Finally, marketers progressively reshaped their own activity and discipline and in so doing, contributed to change the character of markets and the economy at large.

Kjellberg and Helgesson (2006) suggest that generic performativity tends to lead to multiple versions of markets being performed. These multiple versions need not be aligned with each other, opening up a range of possibilities for achieving coherence or coexistence amongst these different versions. For Marion (2009, p. 2140), the performance of marketing consists in all the activities involved in producing and recognising statements, material devices and measures involved in configuring market exchanges. To make up a marketer within an organisation, it is necessary to equip her/him with measuring instruments (e.g. sales figures, consumer panel data) and indicators (e.g. market share, satisfaction indices). Conversely, to make the role fade or disappear it suffices to deprive marketers of their instruments and measures (Marion, 2009, p. 2145). Paraphrasing Kurt Lewin's aphorism, Marion (2009, p. 2146) suggests that "...there is nothing as practical as a good performative theory"¹.

Cochoy and Dubuisson-Quellier (2013) extend this approach to cover a whole host of market professionals, including people (e.g. distributors), professional roles (e.g. packagers, designers) and devices (e.g. guides, standards) whose job is to organise, configure and manage market exchanges. The work of different market professionals (all with their own panoply of statements, devices and measures) is distributed in space and time, and needs to be coordinated (Barrey, Cochoy, & Dubuisson-Quellier, 2000). Moreover, these market professionals do not just coordinate but also compete with each other based on claims about the legitimacy and effectiveness of their expert knowledge (Cochoy & Dubuisson-Quellier, 2013). But, expert knowledge also encompasses local knowledge and tacit forms of expertise emerging from situated practices (Araujo et al., 2010). And, as Callon (2008), Marion (2009) and others note, performance is always a work-in-progress. It requires constant maintenance, the inscription of statements in devices and measures that are always liable to be disrupted and overturned (Araujo, 2007).

Following Law (2009, p. 240), we can conclude that knowledge-based practices in marketing are successful if they are able to accomplish two tasks. First, these practices need to be able to put together knowledge claims (in the form of e.g. theoretical statements, models, data) that hold together, that are compelling to the audiences they address and perform the tasks they set themselves up to do. Secondly, they have to demonstrate their capacity to generate 'realities' and 'imaginaries' that fit with that knowledge.

In this paper, we are concerned with the work of advertising planners in the context of launching a new product in an existing market. The work involved in this project revolved around positioning a new product in a market space and predicting how the introduction of the new product would disturb relations within that space as well as relations outside that space. Positioning involves the conjoint definition of goods and markets (Slater, 2002). A new product alters relations of sameness and difference, it has the potential to destabilise the positioning of existing market goods as well as create new categories. As Finch and Geiger (2011, p. 901) note: "As marketers (and producers and users), we understand that the market objects are always in the gaze of marketers, who typically seek to understand them as objects to be destabilized, undergoing product development, repositioning, redefining, reassociating". Given our overall aim of exploring the question 'what does it mean to say that marketing is performative?', we are particularly interested in exploring a set of subsidiary issues:

- a. What forms of marketing knowledge are mobilised in the work of advertising planners?
- b. How is that knowledge used, by whom and for what purposes?

Methodology

This study is based on an ethnography conducted by the first author in the account planning department of a growing, full-service advertising agency. At the time of the study, the agency was based in Soho, a small, trendy and multicultural part of the West End of London, home to various music, film, media and advertising related businesses. During the year in which the data collection took place, the agency's billings totalled circa £50m, with a net income of £5m. The agency handled 15 client accounts, and employed 50 members of staff of whom three were account planners including the Chief Strategy Officer (CSO), but excluding the first author of this paper who effectively acted as a planner in his role as participant observer. Aside from planning and producing mainstream advertising campaigns with a focus on digital, mobile and social media components, the agency also develops brand strategies. The agency allows creatives to work on their own projects and acts as an incubator for like-minded businesses.

We define ethnography as a research approach that '...draws upon the writer's close observation of and involvement with people in a particular social setting and relates the words spoken and the practices observed or experienced to the overall cultural framework within which they occurred' (Watson, 2011, p. 205). Ethnography implies some form of participant-observation, with the

ethnographer “...participating, overtly or covertly, in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, and/or asking questions through formal and informal interviews, collecting documents and artefacts – in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of inquiry” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 3).

However, participant observation has a variety of meanings depending on whether we place the accent on participation or observation – see e.g. Junker’s (1960) classic typology of roles. The general argument is that the researcher joins the setting as either a partial or full member, and “...participates in and observes activities, asks questions, takes part in the conversations, and reads relevant documents” (Watson, 2011, p. 206). It is this closeness to practice that, as Van Maanen (2011, p. 232) notes, convinces readers “...that what they are reading is an authentic tale written by someone personally knowledgeable about how things are done at some place, at some time, among some people...”.

The first author, Erik joined the agency in March 2012 and stayed until September of the same year. His previous professional work and academic background in marketing provided the agency with an opportunity to host a pair of helping hands in an expanding account planning department, and made negotiating access with the CSO straightforward, via a contact made by the second author. The CSO, appointed Erik as a junior account planner to work directly with a senior planner who happened to be an alumnus of the same educational institution Erik came from, and had studied subjects including marketing, management and information technology at UK universities.

On his first day, Erik was given access to the agency’s internal database as well as a company email address for the duration of the ethnography. His level of responsibility varied from project to project and over time, with increasingly important tasks being assigned to him as familiarity with the account planning process increased. The ethnography thus progressed from being more observational to being more participative as time went on. On the project ‘Silver Ant’ (our codename), the focus of the empirical section, Erik worked as a junior account planner together with a senior planner and the CSO.

Silver Ant was a challenging project, with the aim of launching a new brand of a functional soft drink. The project was, in many ways, characteristic of the work involved in advertising planning – i.e. the mediating role between clients and creatives, translating analytical insights, data and commercial goals into strategic ideas from which campaigns can be created (see e.g. Cronin, 2004; Ariztia, 2013). The project spanned the entire 7 month duration of the ethnography during which it passed through

all the major stages of the account planning process, from early strategic thinking to the elaboration of the creative briefing. Data collection was facilitated by the fact that all project documents were created and shared electronically. Communication occurred mainly via email as most employees would work on more than one project on any given day, making frequent meetings difficult to arrange. Thus, aside from a small pile of paper, the data collected on this project totalled 338 computer files. This includes all the project's milestone documents, such as the pitch, the client brief, the research brief and debrief, the creative brief and all the strategy presentations made to the client.

Furthermore, the data included the various drafts of the documents created by the planners as well as more than 100 e-mails Erik sent, was sent or was copied into. Lastly, all meetings, internal as well as external, were recorded. This amounted to 20 recordings totalling nearly 22 hours. During this period, Erik also wrote field notes using Microsoft OneNote. These notes were written either during or directly after an event such as a meeting or a conversation, as personal reflections, or during down time, when Erik would reflect on the ethnography and his role as a junior account planner.

The data was analysed chronologically in the first instance, in order to explore how agreement was reached among the involved parties and the project was signed off to progress to a new stage. This led to the development of an analytical framework to code the data thematically. To construct the account presented in the following section, particular attention was paid to the forms of knowledge mobilised by account planners, as well as the devices and expertise required to generate and translate such knowledge, in order to construct compelling arguments and align the various actors involved in the project.

The ethnography was conducted overtly and followed approved ethics guidelines. Participants were informed about the nature of the study and the reason for Erik's role as a junior account planner. All participants were asked to complete and sign a consent form. Access to clients was governed by the CSO, who acted as gatekeeper and would personally inform clients about Erik's dual role as junior account planner and ethnographer. By signing a work contract with the agency, Erik automatically subscribed to a non-disclosure agreement regarding interactions with clients. Throughout the study, particular care was taken to guarantee confidentiality and participants' anonymity.

Project Silver Ant – a Case Study

Introduction

In December 2011, the advertising agency was invited to pitch for a new project by an Italian consumer goods company. This client has a presence in over 50 countries and brands that are often leaders in their respective categories. The objective of this project, as outlined in the pitch document, was to 'investigate the opportunity for a new functional soft drink aimed at young adults in the London area'. This drink was to incorporate aspects of both 'energy' and 'health' and was thus to be launched into a market described as 'dynamic, competitive and driven by cutting edge marketing' and as 'culturally rich and diverse' with brands such as Lucozade, Powerade and most notably Red Bull being key competitors.

After having won the pitch, the agency received a full brief document from the client in January 2012. The client brief contained detailed findings from quantitative research that had been commissioned by the client regarding the UK energy and sports drinks market. The senior planner's reading of the client's intention was that since the market for energy and sports drinks in the UK was growing, there were profits to be had by launching a product that could be positioned as a healthy energy drink targeted at the growing segment of health conscious consumers. Furthermore, this putatively healthy energy drink was to become a counterpoint to the leading energy drink Red Bull. The task at hand was to develop a suitable product proposition.

First round proposition development – identifying the target audience

The senior planner immediately began conducting desk research in order to create a consumer profile. He collated a range of images taken from Google on a PowerPoint slide that he felt described the target audience. The images mainly consisted of photographs of the covers of books including *Freakonomics* and *Steve Jobs: The Exclusive Biography*, magazines such as *Monocle* and *Wallpaper**, products and services including Kickstarter, LOVEFILM.com and the Apple iPad, websites such as *The School of Life* and TED, and fashion logos including American Apparel and UNIQLO. The aim of this profile was to describe the social and cultural trends the senior planner believed to be important, rather than defining details of a specific target audience, and to identify desires and aspirations that could be tapped into in order to promote the product. The profile was labelled 'Generation NxT' (our codename) and was a means of showcasing to the client the planners' insights into consumer culture. Generation NxT was further fleshed out by contrasting it to the 'old' generation that prevailed in the mid-90s when Red Bull was launched. The senior planner created a similar slide, labelled 'The Party Hard Generation', using images and logos of the Sony Walkman, the band Blur,

the Spice Girls, the Ministry of Sound and New Labour's 'Cool Britannia'. These slides were then brought together in a client presentation that also reviewed seven key competitors, their market positionings, target audiences and the cultural trends they tap into. All this lead up to a set of seven potential propositions phrased as '[Silver Ant] helps me live every moment', '[Silver Ant] helps me [...]'. Each of these propositions was followed by a paragraph written in the first person, where a fictitious representative of Generation Nxt talks about her or his interests, desires, passions, dreams and aspirations, and a description of the role that Silver Ant could play in that person's life – see figure 1 for an example. The aim of this presentation was to discuss the general direction of the propositions with the client and to narrow down the list. Thus, after a client meeting in February, the decision was made to develop three propositions further to be tested in focus group research.

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Second round proposition development – top-down laddering

The approach taken by the senior planner to develop the propositions further was through laddering with the aim of connecting each proposition to a subset of six distinct product attributes, which had been defined and provided by the client. Although an arrow indicates that the ladders are to be read from the bottom up, the various draft documents leading up to them show that the thinking behind the ladders is in fact, top to bottom. Thus, from top to bottom, the ladders read 'Proposition (motivation)', 'Audience Insight', 'Essence (reward)', 'Emotional Benefit', 'Rational Benefit' as well as approved claims from the European Food and Safety Authority (EFSA) that had been provided by the client, and 'Attributes (key product features)'. The proposition, audience insight, essence, emotional and rational benefit were all written in the first person from the perspective of a fictitious Silver Ant consumer, with the consumer insight framed by quotation marks, and were all logically anchored in the product attributes.

While the senior planner developed the propositions, the Chief Strategy Officer (CSO) contacted three different market research agencies to pitch for the project. The research agency that won the account was selected because the lead researcher and head of the research agency had much experience in working with functional foods and drinks, and because the CSO knew the researcher was very good at leading product development focus groups.

First contestation – multiple approaches to planning

The researcher was briefed in early March. The senior planner first talked the researcher through Generation NxT, then outlined Silver Ant's ingredients and their functions and finally presented the three proposition ladders connecting the former to the latter.

When the senior planner had finished his presentation, the researcher took over the discussion mostly addressing the CSO. He spoke about his own experience in researching and developing propositions for functional food products. During this conversation, the researcher began to switch from saying 'I' when talking about market research to saying 'we' when talking about proposition development. He explained that the way he developed and tested propositions was by starting with the product's ingredients and to ladder up from there, rather than to start with an audience insight. As the researcher explained, in his experience, the best way to position a functional drink is by tapping into the target audience's latent beliefs regarding the ingredients, not via tapping into cultural trends, a process he regarded as typical of so much of contemporary marketing. He thus urged the planners 'to take a step back from the creative side and to look at the real world'.

After the research brief, the senior planner expressed to Erik his disappointment with the meeting. Clearly, there were two different approaches regarding proposition development. The researcher's approach was to start with the 'real world' in order to tap into latent beliefs and then create a 'credible, future real world' where consumers get something they believe works. The senior planner's approach, however, was to start with a cultural insight in order to tap into people's desires and to give consumers something they truly want. This difference was accepted, as the researcher was, according to the senior planner and the CSO, 'very rational' in contrast to the advertising agency planners themselves. The CSO, much more than the senior planner, was happy to follow the researcher's advice, and thus it was agreed to re-develop the propositions for qualitative testing.

Third round proposition development – identifying the product

At the end of March, the senior planner and Erik began to research the specific ingredients of Silver Ant and their possible functions using Google searches. They broke down the product into its constituents and documented the multiple functions of each ingredient. Many Wikipedia pages and YouTube health videos later, they began to play around with possible combinations of functions and ingredients. After some time, eight new propositions emerged. However, instead of being defined culturally, each proposition was defined by a problem-solution pairing, where a combination of Silver Ant's ingredients would help resolve a psycho-physiological issue such as feeling tired or becoming ill.

The client was generally happy with the new approach suggested by the researcher, but expressed concern about the nature of the new propositions. The client wrote in an email that the new product propositions would have to be checked by their lawyers and R&D department since they made specific claims about the effects of Silver Ant's ingredients. A few email exchanges with the R&D department followed to confirm that Silver Ant really had the described effects and that these claims would be approved by the EFSA.

Fourth round proposition development – bottom-up laddering

As before, the planners, together with the client, narrowed down the eight propositions to just three, which were then developed further for the research. This again took the form of laddering, but as the draft documents show (see figure 2), the ladders this time very much followed a bottom-up logic, starting with specific ingredients at the bottom and then working up to the consumer insight (although a double arrow now indicated that the ladder could be read in either direction). Thus, from bottom to top, the ladders read 'Ingredients', 'Attributes', 'Effects', 'Rational Benefit', 'Emotional Benefit', 'Essence', 'Proposition' and 'Insight'. These ladders, with each proposition

clearly anchored in specific ingredients, were then sent to the researcher, who was happy to use them in research.

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Second Contestation – research versus planning

The focus groups began to take place in April with the first two sessions being attended by the planning team, the account manager, the lead creative and the client. These sessions could not have gone more differently. The first, 26-34 year old female established workers, were intrigued by the health benefits of the product, stating throughout how important health and diet were to them. The second group, 18-22 year old males in full-time employment, were not convinced by the product propositions at all. They had never heard of many of Silver Ant's ingredients and thought that some of the benefits claimed were 'marketing bogus'.

The planning team was emailed the research debrief in May. It concluded that the team should focus on the attributes of 'energy and vitamins' and a proposition based on the concept of 'restore'. The planners, in particular the CSO, were not happy with this last conclusion for two reasons. First, the research debrief was structured less like a presentation of findings and more like an argument leading up to the researcher's 'restore' proposition. The CSO thus felt that too many other avenues had been left unexplored in the debrief, which was made worse by the fact that the 'restore' proposition had just recently been used by a competitor's new product. Second, the CSO felt that the 'restore' proposition was too rational. Not only did it start from the negative state of 'when you are down', but it was also seen as too limited with regard to launching an entire new brand, as opposed to a single product.

A few days later, the researcher presented his debrief to the client and the planners at the advertising agency. When the researcher had finished and left, the planners, and especially the CSO, expressed their negative view of the debrief's conclusion to the client explaining that they were looking for a positive proposition such as 'lightly energising'. Furthermore, the CSO also began to qualify the results of the market research, saying that 'you can only get the right answers when you ask the right questions', and that research usually does not lead to innovative ideas. After discussing these issues, the client sided with the planners, and thus the idea of using a 'restore' proposition was dismissed.

At this point, the client also voiced concerns regarding the term 'energy', as they felt that, looking at the work the planners had done on the functions of Silver Ant's ingredients, the energy-related function of Silver Ant was too weak for it to be classified as an energy drink. They simply did not see Silver Ant as an energy drink, which at first seemed somewhat at odds with their desire to enter the energy and sports drinks market. However, as the client explained, they wanted to create a whole new category of functional drink in the same way they perceived Red Bull to have created the

energy drinks market. The client was thus very keen on the idea of creating an entirely new 'equilibrium category' (this was to become the final proposition and thus details including its name have been changed) to go up against the existing energy and sports drinks. The research had dismissed the idea of 'equilibrium', stating that most potential buyers did not think that there was a natural bodily equilibrium, so the client and planning team settled on the idea of 'vitality'.

The CSO then emailed the researcher:

Afterwards we were talking about restore. While we liked this thought, we were also worried that it could be a bit too functional. An alternative is [Vitality]. So, rather than picking you up when you feel below par, this keeps you at your best. It is still based upon energy and vitamins and it taps into the insight about keeping up with life. It's positive, it means life and it sort of works with [ants] – which are very vital. Do you have any thoughts on that?

The researcher replied:

I can completely understand your desire to flip 'restore' and make it positive. You may be entirely right that 'Vitality/keeps you at your best' is the best 'spin' to put on restore. [...] That said, I feel uncomfortable with 'Vitality/keeps you at your best'. [...] 'Vitality/keeps you at your best' also implies a prophylactic/ proactive approach that is counter-intuitive to the bulk of the target audience. It seems to be about maintenance rather than solving a problem when it occurs, and hence at odds with their reactive approach to life. 'Restore' is intrinsically reactive and hence works with the grain of target users' mindsets. [...] I would also be concerned that 'Vitality/keeps you at your best' sounds very familiar territory in the world of healthy food/drink – I can't help but think of the clichéd image of the woman cartwheeling on the beach! [...] I suspect the kind of drinks we're talking about need an explicit functionality in their communication. While an emotionally based 'wrapper' context may well help enhance appeal and identification with the creative, as well as drive 'premiumness', I think functional properties need to be explicit in order to create differentiation and a role for the product.

However, the researcher's approach to planning did not click with the planners, and his comments were ultimately ignored.

Fifth round proposition development – identifying a gap in the market

In order to flesh out the meaning of 'vitality' and to find out how this proposition could be brought to life and positioned, the planners began to search for other products that included the term 'vitality' in their propositions. The planners then received an email from the client expressing further misgivings about the positioning of Silver Ant as an energy drink and that 'vitality' might already be a step too far into that direction. They thus asked the planners to flesh out the 'vitality' proposition, and take another look at the idea of 'equilibrium'. At this point, the planners received internal

agency warnings regarding slipping timings and budgets. No one had expected that there would be quite as many rounds of proposition development.

It quickly became apparent that moving from the original, culturally-anchored propositions to the current, functionally-anchored ones meant bringing a whole different set of competitors into play. Competitors were no longer defined by their target audiences and the cultural trends they tap into, but instead by the functional benefits their products provided. To identify a potential gap in the market for Silver Ant, two 2x2 matrices were drawn up for the 'vitality' and 'equilibrium' categories. The vitality market was defined by an 'artificial – natural' and a 'recovery – elevation' axis. 'Elevation' had been chosen as the planners were desperately trying to avoid the word 'energy', which now almost seemed to scare the client. The equilibrium market, on the other hand, was defined by 'nutrition – tonic' and 'body – mind' axes.

The vitality and equilibrium propositions and market mappings were presented to the client in June. Although the planners preferred 'vitality' to 'equilibrium', the client still believed in creating an 'equilibrium' category, but also liked the thinking regarding 'vitality'. While there was a clear gap in the 'equilibrium matrix' for Silver Ant to enter, the CSO commented to the client team:

Well, I think, 'Is there a gap in the market, and is there a market in the gap?' is the big question at the end of the day [...] I think good advertising, good marketing can help create a market in a gap. [...] So there may not be a market in the gap at the moment, but we can create a market in the gap.

At the end of a long meeting with the client it was agreed to continue the work on the 'equilibrium' proposition – to address the gap in the market – but to import elements from the 'vitality' proposition – to ensure that there would be a market in the gap.

Sixth round proposition development – creating a market in the gap

To finalise the 'equilibrium' proposition and thus what the 'equilibrium' category would look like, the next step was to create a new ladder working up from the specific product attributes to a brand philosophy/mission. Again, contact was made with the client's R&D department in July to ensure that all functional claims could be supported. Next, a brand manifesto was created and brought to life through a mood film using clips ranging from Steve Jobs and Forrest Gump, to Kung Fu Panda and the Incredible Hulk (the latter was used to visualise how Red Bull turns you into a caricature of yourself). Possible tag lines were also envisioned.

The client was satisfied with the work that had been done and raised only one outstanding issue. The account planners had always understood Silver Ant to be a natural product, a quality that was

central to the brand manifesto and setting it apart from the competition. It thus came as a shock when the client mentioned that Silver Ant could not actually be claimed to be a 'natural' product. However, as the CSO saw it, this could be turned into an 'opportunity to make the proposition even tighter'. Thus, the client agreed for the 'equilibrium' proposition to be finalised. The account planners were also asked to re-evaluate the target audience as the proposition had changed dramatically since the beginning of the project, and to finalise the competitor map.

The finalised proposition was presented to the client in August. Instead of contrasting Silver Ant's supposed naturalness to the artificialness of the competition, its gentle way of providing energy through re-establishing the body's natural equilibrium was now contrasted to the 'crash effect' that may follow after consuming energy drinks. Generation NxT remained the target audience, despite the research having shown that 'equilibrium' appeals more to an older audience. However, as the CSO explained to the client, Generation NxT represented an aspiration that went far beyond those who actually fall under that segment, and that the description was therefore much wider than a strict understanding of those who may primarily buy the drink would suggest. A revised brand map was also presented, with competitors now positioned according to their ingredients on a 2x2 matrix, divided by a 'toxifies – detoxifies' and a 'helps release energy – gives energy' axis (see figure 3). Here, Silver Ant was positioned in the 'helps release energy/detoxifies' corner. Lastly, a draft creative brief was presented. The brief covered the key problem that needed to be overcome by the creative for Silver Ant to be a success, the dream to be tapped into in order to achieve this, and the proposed solution to the aforementioned problem including the benefits of an 'equilibrium' drink. At last, the client approved the creative brief and in September, the planners passed on the finalised brief to the creative team.

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Analysis - creating a market for Silver Ant

The Silver Ant case describes a trilateral interaction between a client, an advertising agency and a market research agency. The purpose of these interactions was to finalise a proposition, crystallising the prospective relationship between the product and its intended market, before passing it on to the creative department of the ad agency who would use the idea to create an explicit consumer-facing campaign. A proposition introduces scenarios, configurations in which prospective relations of consumption and competition are enacted. The question addressed by the protagonists is, to paraphrase Slater (2002, p. 63), 'what are the possible interrelated definitions of products and markets and which one holds together firmly and provides generative insights for the creative team?'

Our case shows that the process of arriving at a compelling proposition was neither linear nor devoid of contests between all the actors involved, in particular concerning the performativity of their respective approaches. As in Ariztia's (2013) study, the process involved the progressive qualification of product attributes, consumer profiles and competitive relations, linking them to a prospective world where Silver Ant would slot in seamlessly. In this iterative process, there was no privileged starting point. All these three elements were seen as potentially malleable, even if claims about the effects of Silver Ant's ingredients had to be periodically checked by the client's R&D department and legal teams against EFSA's guidelines, and against possible product formulations. The interaction between planners at the agency and the client team revealed the tensions surrounding what could or could not be claimed about the product (e.g. was Silver Ant a natural product or not?).

The process used to refine these qualifications and their interrelationships was framed by a version of laddering or means-ends chains as a technique. Laddering assumes that product attributes can be associated with advertising messages tying consumption to valued ends (Gutman, 1982). The underpinning rationale is that values largely frame consumer choice, and that product categories reduce the complexity of choice in situations where a range of products are potential satisfiers of particular valued states.

But the version of laddering used in our case hardly resembles its depiction in the academic literature. The senior planner, who kick-started the process of proposition development, mobilised a

set of societal trends in order to identify cultural values that could be matched with product attributes (Cronin, 2004). In this approach, Generation Nxt stood for a particular set of values that needed to be articulated and contrasted with the values that purportedly prevailed when Red Bull was launched. The contrast with Red Bull enacted both a set of competitive relations between products as well as generational values. The laddering process thus moved both downwards, from values to consumer profiles, and upwards, from product attributes to consumer profiles, to develop and refine an initial set of propositions.

The involvement of the research agency provided another twist to this process. Laddering was retained as a working method, but product attributes now provided the anchor. Product ingredients were matched to particular benefits and in turn, these had to be matched with problems that could be identified by focus groups participants. Two contrasting versions of the consumer were produced through these two uses of laddering. The senior planners' version 'made up' a consumer connected to broader trends, lifestyles and aspirations, alert to advertising messages and product benefits that tapped into these values. The research agency's version portrayed an altogether more calculative consumer. Advertising claims had to be tightly linked to product ingredients and related to problems that could be related to focus groups discussions. The contest between these two different versions was never fully resolved. The ensuing discussions revealed an acute reflexivity about the performative aspects of methods ('market research can only enact a limited version of the consumer') and exposed frictions between different approaches to planning, with the research agency sticking to the importance of functional attributes and the planning team exploring cultural approaches with more obvious implications for communication campaigns.

The next phase of the project was framed by another familiar marketing tool, the market map drawn as a 2x2 matrix and positioning Silver Ant against its prospective competitors. Ethnographies of advertising agencies have often noted the tendency of marketers to use simple, binary classification devices (see e.g. Moeran, 1996). Maleyft (2003, p. 152) suggests that the type of classification that maps and grids lay out helps marketers reduce and simplify a range of complex behaviours into more manageable clusters. This provides practitioners with a simplified language to facilitate communication and build affinity between the agency and the client. But, maps are not just symbolic devices to facilitate communication or lubricate social relations. They are part of a socio-technical *agencement* that is mobilised by the agency to persuade the client that it can enact a new configuration of relations in the marketplace which will position Silver Ant in the envisaged map coordinates (Doganova & Eyquem-Renault, 2009; Pollock & Williams, 2009).

The discussion between the client and the agency centred around which product attributes should feature in the map. As in the case of laddering, the market map was used as a tool to represent the spatial structure of a market, in which competing products are located by axes related to perceptions of different products. As Stefflre (1965), one of the pioneers of this approach, remarked, individuals will behave towards a new object in a manner that is similar to the one in which they behave towards known objects that are classified in the same category. Thus Silver Ant had to find to find a vacant space in the market map that is neither too close to the existing competition (Red Bull, mainly) or so distant from existing offerings as to be difficult to classify. As Finch and Geiger (2011) note, positioning is a complex balancing act that requires marketers to make comparisons between the good or service with existing market objects, whilst making it singular to the consumer with reference to a range of calculations that lie outside the market frame. Thus, the question was to find a positioning of the object within a market map that identified a vacant space ('a gap in the market') and link it to a consumer profile that could be feasibly recruited ('is there a market in the gap as well as a gap in the market?').

The final round of proposition development led to a tight focus on 'equilibrium'. An agreed market map had Silver Ant positioned in a particular quadrant, and the creative brief brought together the problem, aspirations and values to be tapped into, and the solution. The proposition thus brought together a number of different elements that had been filtered and purified, leading to the discarding of previous themes and ideas (e.g. energy, naturalness). These ideas had been 'interactively stabilized', to employ an analogy taken from Pickering's (1989) description of the practice of scientific experimentation. As Pickering (1989) explains, the term 'interaction' stresses the interdependence of all relevant elements, the credibility that each element lends the others so that a degree of closure is achieved. The reference to stabilisation, in turn, is intended to draw attention to the fragility of these achieved coherences which are always liable to be broken up and reassembled – in this case in the hands of creative teams, and in further interactions within the agency, as well as between the agency and the client, and in later encounters with other client managers.

The final proposition for Silver Ant embodied a variety of calculations and hypothesized relations of consumption and competition. As Slater (2002) suggested, advertisers take nothing as self-evident in their quest to perform markets, to generate scripts where particular attachments are produced. Novel objects such as Silver Ant may become vectors for forging relations amongst consumers, their desires, aspirations and needs; a product as an assemblage of ingredients which produces particular effects; established competitors which helped generate broad cultural understandings about categories; and advertising messages which attempt to stitch together these different elements into

a compelling story. Underpinning these efforts, we can find understandings, tools and methods that guide and frame these efforts. As we have shown, versions of laddering, market mapping and the outputs of focus group discussions were mobilized to guide the planners' search for propositions as well as provide a platform for discussions between the client, the advertising and the research agencies.

But, in this case, the methods employed were highly streamlined versions of those found in marketing manuals or academic journals. Their use by the agency was not intended to establish general propositions or empirically test them in accordance with scientific protocols. Instead, their task is to (temporarily) stabilize market entities and their relations to make sense of and perform potential (and sometimes contested) versions of the future desired by clients and the agencies. It is thus apt to say that they are part of the process of restructuring products and markets, and that they are performative within this process: they help generate new realities and imaginaries.

Conclusions

In this final section, we return to the central research question we formulated earlier: 'what does it mean to say that marketing is performative?' The first and, in our view, least productive answer is to equate the performativity of marketing with the wholesale diffusion of academic theories, methods and techniques to practice. This approach is underpinned by a sender-receiver model, in which a sender's a message is expected to travel unscathed to a population of receivers and obstacles are regarded as noise that must be attenuated or eliminated. It is only in such a context that it makes sense to concern ourselves with theory-practice gaps or the genealogical integrity of a particular tool or method.

Although we know little about the biography of marketing tools and methods, the scarce evidence points to complex and bidirectional paths of the evolution across disciplines and between academia and practice. Lee's (2010) account of the evolution of focus group techniques, originating from sociologists engaged in war time work and transformed through commercial market research, provides one such example. In our case, marketing techniques such as laddering or market mapping were transformed, simplified and adapted to the practices of advertising planners. Their origins, to quote-paraphrase Merton (1987, p. 564), were obliterated through their incorporation in practices.

And yet, the hybrid nature of tools and methods deployed in practice does not mean to say that marketing knowledge is not performative as a result.

This paper makes two main contributions to the performativity literature. First, as our empirical case suggests, marketing's performativity is apparent in the processes involved in building, disrupting and

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reassembling markets as socio-technical configurations. In our example, it involved the attempt to disrupt an existing market (energy drinks) by devising novel ways to qualify these drinks (e.g. crash effects), suggesting new forms of categorization (e.g. vitality) and new attachments between products and their prospective consumers. Marketing, as an actor in these networks, is involved in both representing and intervening. At the same time, marketing cannot be easily reduced to a single form of expertise. As the interactions in the Silver Ant case exemplify, there were multiple attempts at performing probable relations of consumption and competition, and contests between what are deemed to constitute effective methods to perform those relations.

Our example also shows that the credibility of a proposition is measured by how well it is able to interactively stabilize relations amongst a set of different elements, namely the qualification of products, customers and competitors. Marketing tools and methods played a crucial role in framing and stabilizing the relations amongst these different elements which, in turn, allowed the project to progress to subsequent stages. This process also illustrated the operation of systematic knowledge gathering (e.g. the studying of social and cultural trends) as well as *bricolage*, the use of whatever is at hand and can fit the objectives of a project (Duymeydjan & RÜling, 2010), as exemplified by the use of images to give form to more abstract arguments. This observation resonates with Moeran's (1996, p. 128) account of a Japanese advertising agency where: "People employed in the Agency's marketing division tended to collect all kinds of data and retained them on the principle that they might at some stage come in handy."

Our second contribution relates to how the development of a proposition, as in the Silver Ant case, illustrates how performativity is about 'future-making', to imagine, give shape and script new market configurations. Performativity is thus about how a prospective ontology, to quote Rip (2009, p. 418), to project a future state of the world deemed desirable and feasible "includes projections (and ongoing shaping) of future states of the world as 'expected', i.e. possible and possibly desirable" (2009, p. 418). For a scenario to materialize, multiple alignments amongst a wide range of actors need to happen, something that is far from guaranteed. Will consumers see the promised benefits of Silver Ant as relevant or credible? Will retailers help Silver Ant's intended positioning by listing it in the right category, thus helping to enact the market map featured in the proposition? And so on.

This brings out the indeterminate, future tense aspects of performativity, the enacting of new realities through the practices of the present. It concerns the notion that ontologies and their relations are not fixed or given, but are ultimately malleable and amenable to influence. And this suggests a focus on processes through which knowledge is mobilized to render durable realities (e.g. consumer dispositions, competitive relations) malleable and vice-versa (i.e. make fluid realities

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stabilized and durable).

Finally, we suggest that our study has two implications for the study of performativity. The first relates to the biography of tools and methods used in marketing practice. Our suggestion is that we need a clearer understanding of how these tools and methods come to life and what purpose they serve in practice, rather than deride them as overly simplistic, pseudo-scientific or pale shadows of more sophisticated ways of representing the world. The 2x2 market maps depicted in our case description provide a case in point. They constitute simple ways of representing complex realities and, like all management technologies (Czarniawska & Mouritsen, 2009), they abbreviate and condense complex realities. Their effectiveness does not depend on the accuracy of their representation but on their ability to perform valuable work, in this case helping to interactively stabilize a range of relations and allowing the project to move to the next stage.

The second suggestion relates to the temporal nature of performativity. Thus far, performativity has often been understood in terms of how knowledge in the form of models, tools, algorithms and so on shapes particular practices, and the feedback loops between ideas and action. But, as our case illustrates, performativity is also concerned with the virtual, the latent and the uncertainty of processes that stretch well into the future. Models, such as market maps or laddering tools, have a role to play in populating a hypothetical world with entities (e.g. products, customers, competitors) that interact within that world as posited by the model. As Doganova and Eyquem-Renault (2009) suggest, models are often vehicles for demonstrating the feasibility of a possible future and enrolling the support of others. If the representations produced by models succeed in enrolling allies and gathering support, they begin to perform the world they describe as the alignments envisaged by the models begin to materialize. To return to the title of this paper, models do not just help us find 'gaps in markets' but also enact 'markets in gaps'.

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ⁱ Our translation from the French original.