

**An Examination of Celtic Craft and the Creative Consciousness
as a Contribution to Marketing Creativity**

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Abstract:

Examination of the Celtic craft sector identifies a creative form of marketing which has its foundations in imagination, intuition and innovation, rather than the linear prescriptions of formal marketing frameworks and language which still dominate contemporary marketing management texts. The creative marketing competencies identified in the sector are also grounded within a wider creative marketing paradigm where experimental forms of marketing are encouraged, postmodern ideals are embraced and artistic philosophy and practice encouraged. The controlled Saxon influenced Marketing Establishment is challenged by the freer, more creative fringe of Celtic marketing as the avant garde.

Key Words: Creativity, Craft, Marketing, Entrepreneurship, Strategy, Imagination

Celtic Connections:

The author has a strong Celtic background, spending his formative years studying in the Kingdom of Dalriada. The merits of a Celtic education can be seen in the work of Brian Friel who promoted the creative linkage between ancient Greece and the hedge schools of 19th century Ireland, where Saxon order was abandoned in favour of philosophical debates about the meaning of life (Friel, 1981). Investigation by the author into Celtic creativity has focused on how craft sector microenterprises can internationalise despite often severe resource constraints (Fillis, 2000; 2001; 2002a; 2002b; 2002c; 2003; 2004). Insight can be gleaned from this into the wider Celtic business consciousness. The paper begins by examining the weaknesses of the dominant Saxon Marketing Establishment. A more creative future is then unveiled through consideration of the Celtic fringe of crafted marketing thought and practice.

Saxonification of Marketing Thought:

The way in which a Celtic entrepreneur practices marketing bears little resemblance to the prescriptive approaches of the Saxon Academy. An entrepreneur often makes decisions regardless of his/her limited resources. A Celtic entrepreneur is further disposed to risk taking due to geographical isolation and the need to create more widespread demand for the product. There is also something specific about the mindset of the Celtic entrepreneur which relates to their lack of fear of networking and the ability to forge informal modes of relationship building. Although all entrepreneurs possess these characteristics to a degree, it is the extent to which these competencies are exploited which sets them apart.

The idiosyncrasies of Celtic marketing reflect the need for critical thinking which is already emerging in consumption studies (Schroeder, 2000; Brown and Patterson, 2000), arts marketing (Butler, 2000) and in alternative methodologies such as the metaphor (Cornelissen, 2003). Marketing assumptions are based on the linear business environment modelled in marketing textbooks whereas marketing practice is often different, with non-linearity, fragmentation and chaos being experienced. Buijs (2003), for example, considers the new product development process to exhibit patterns of circular chaos rather than a longitudinal progression.

Marketing theory was originally intended for large manufacturing organisations. However, the majority of firms today are small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) and most of these are microenterprises, employing less than ten people (Storey, 1994). The smaller firm environment is characterised by non-linear, chaotic, factors where competitive advantage is achieved by exploiting competencies grounded in marketing, entrepreneurship and creativity (Durkin and McGowan, 2001). The marketing concept has been criticised for being too customer focused and stifling innovation from within the firm (Bennett and Cooper, 1981). There is also a need for outward product-oriented push. The gap between linear Saxon marketing theory and creative, Celtic marketing practice is illustrated in Figure 1:

Take in Figure 1

This difference in interpretation is not just the preserve of marketing, but can also be seen in the wider strategic management domain where environmental and ecological concerns need to be considered within the wider turbulent environment (Thomas et al., 1994).

The New Celtic Twilight and the Reawakening of the Creative Imagination:

Often stemming from unimaginative customer thinking, market research can result in products that are safe and bland, rather than challenging and creative. Martin and Faircloth (1995) refer to a study by Kuczarski which found that 90% of new products are really only line extensions while the remaining 10% contain the most profit

potential. Therefore, there is merit in periodically distancing the business from the customer and observing what customers do, rather than what they say. Butler (2000:355, 359) discusses product centred marketing in the art industry where the creative focus is ultimately internal to the creator:

...artists feel they must shun the notion of following, and produce or perform out of their own commitment to their field...the ethos is...fundamentally different to most business scenarios...artists are the ultimate manifestation of that absolute insult in the marketing schoolyard, namely the 'product orientation'. But their internal focus...is what makes them artists...

This clash or tension between market and product/artist centred philosophies can also be found in film and other creative industries (DeFillippi and Arthur, 2002).

A range of creative factors have been identified which hold true across time and which contribute to effective small firm marketing using limited resources (Fillis, 2002d). Being prepared to experiment with a variety of approaches is seen as central to success. Analysis of entrepreneurial owner/managers and other creative individuals has shown that inventiveness, playfulness, self centredness and the development of an individual management style positively interact with sets of more conventional business competencies in order to give the firm a competitive advantage in the marketplace. Embracing the arts can stimulate the entrepreneurial imagination and heighten aesthetic consciousness (Chia, 1996). Figure 2 illustrates how a creative, Celtic, approach to market research mirrors actual firm behaviour.

Take in Figure 2

Insight into understanding this nonlinear behaviour is presented in the following section of the paper which focuses on research carried out in the Celtic craft sector.

The Development of the Celtic Crafts:

The origins of today's Celtic craft firm can be traced to the Medieval period (Heslop, 1997), the Italian Renaissance (Welch, 1997) and the Arts and Crafts movement (Naylor, 1971). However, the nature and meaning of craft has altered, from a vernacular status to the aesthetic appreciation of the craft product (Aslin, 1981). Vernacular crafts derive from the culture of the society in which they have developed and tend to be linked to the traditional view of the crafts, based in rural communities (Dean, 1994). Leeke (1994) defines craft as involving individuals and firms making or manufacturing a functional or decorative product which has a handmade element at some stage in its production. The author defines craft as having a high degree of hand-made input, but not necessarily produced or designed using traditional materials. It should be produced as a one-off or as part of a small batch, the design of which may or may not be culturally embedded in the country of production, and which is sold for profit (Fillis, 2003). Contemporary literature suggests that the crafts industry be viewed as part of the greater cultural and creative industries (Myerscough, 1996).

The tension between formal, Saxon modes of marketing and the more creative Celtic form of marketing is explored in the following section of the paper by investigating how

small craft businesses can overcome barriers to growth by using their creative marketing competencies together with a strong product centred approach to business.

Researching the Crafts Sector

The author's empirical research focused on extracting data on the internationalisation process (Johanson and Vahlne, 1990) of the craft firm across Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England. Issues investigated included the possibility that owner/managers from a Celtic background possessed certain advantages in accessing international markets and that this Celtic dimension influenced marketing decision making.

Internationalisation theory states that companies begin to export to culturally close countries first of all, before experience gives them confidence to look further afield (Johanson and Vahlne, 1977). Many Irish businesses deliberately incorporate Celtic design into their work, relying on the symbolism and associated meaning to sell the product to culturally close markets. There may be a degree of exploitation here among the more entrepreneurially inclined Celtic makers who freely admit that shamrock imagery sells well in the USA and that they don't mind compromising their artistic ideals, if they had any in the first place. Others refuse to 'make a quick buck', and prefer, instead to put their Celtic minds to alternative forms of creativity, perhaps grounded in design influences they have experienced while travelling, or as freer flowing subconscious-level creative outputs. This Celtic connection means that the craft has value in some countries but not in others, suggesting that there are zones in certain

areas of the world which readily embrace the Celtic aesthetic. The Celtic ‘currency’ means that there are particular export market destinations which are preferred over others and which are subsequently developed in an entrepreneurial fashion.

Exporters from a non-Celtic background need to develop links with more geographically distant countries than their Celtic counterparts. To describe some Celtic craftspeople as lazy and complacent would be wrong. Instead, they feel that by exploiting (in an entrepreneurial sense) their historical, cultural connections, there is no need to look further afield. The success of the Celtic craft product has led to some from non Celtic backgrounds copying their designs and passing off their work as Celtic and Celtic inspired. There are differences between Celtic countries in terms of the way in which day to day business develops; for example, the annual trade fair Showcase Ireland has been a long term success in Dublin, while the Scottish equivalent has never quite reached similar heights of success. International buyers are given the full Celtic experience, rather than a more formal, direct business to business interaction. Initially focusing solely on crafts, this event now also includes giftware, fashion, jewellery and interior design.

In-depth interviews with respondents from Scotland and Ireland show that, despite apparently similar Celtic backgrounds, there are some differences in business practices. The Irish maker seems more able to exploit intuitive marketing competencies whilst the closeness to the English border may mean that Scottish business methods tend to

sometimes veer towards the more formal mechanisms of Saxon thinking. There can be negative connotations associated with exploitation of Celticness. Some makers feel that having a Celtic ethos can impede development of the business while others openly exploit the connection. It seems to depend on whether or not the maker believes in the Celtic aesthetic and subsequently having the nerve and ability to exploit this connection in the marketplace. Compare these contrasting attitudes:

I quite like those kind of games if you like, where you can hide your ethnic background. But I would be hiding it rather than exploiting it up front. I don't find that up front business very interesting. I think it leads to divide rather than harmony (English maker intent on hiding their identity)

I don't like to get bogged down in that avenue because that can be restricting. That holds down the talent, the potential for ideas coming from within the person. A lot of people would say that's a load of rubbish – do the Celtic thing and make millions...I don't know if they do or not (Northern Irish maker refusing to exploit Celtic connection)

We use Celtic design in the work. It does sell a lot of things – a wee individual style of it. You can sort of look around and say “That's one of Kevin's”. (Northern Ireland maker exploiting Celtic connection)

Selling something to the Americans, if you put a shamrock on it or a Celtic pattern they think it's great. And it doesn't matter if it's from Ireland, England, Scotland or Wales, they love it.

The Celtic dimension can be seen to assist in the marketing of the product. Even non Celtic craftspeople, either by accident, or through deliberate courses of action, utilise the mistaken belief by the customer that their work is Celtic in order to sell the product. Some exporters in Ireland have come to incorporate a degree of Celticness in the design of the product but in a more subtle way by:

get(ing) the Irish idea across without the leprechauns, without all the tourism, without the Walt Disney.

The notion of the Celtic aesthetic, grounded in pre-Christian and Christian iconography is embraced by some makers while others intentionally dismiss it and instead incorporate a more personal creative approach which includes influencing factors such as overseas travel and exposure to alternative aesthetics. This difference in attitude can be explained by the development of owner/manager typologies or profiles (Covin, 1991). Triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data has enabled the identification of four orientations.

There are those who have chosen to work in the craft industry because of the type of lifestyle involved and are unwilling to sacrifice this in order to expand the business (*the lifestyler*). For some, the business has evolved from a part time interest or pastime. There is some evidence of growth ambition, but only to a certain size. This will have implications for export development. Many lifestylers are rurally located and crave tranquillity:

It's a hobby turned into work, you know. I have no special college background and I don't export. I've never thought of exporting because there is nothing really that we would make that would be for the export market... There's no possibility of becoming a millionaire or anything like that - it's a steady wage... We have very few private customers because of where we are. We're in the middle of the country. It's sort of remote - there's no customers walking past (Northern Ireland maker)..

With my personal domestic situation at the moment, I don't want to get too involved with support agencies in that their primary interest is in job creation. I don't particularly want to employ anybody. I'd rather stay out of their way, really. You only attract the attention of the tax man... To tell you the truth, when you rang there, I was watching telly, having a cup of coffee. (Republic of Ireland maker).

Another type of craft owner/manager is the business-oriented entrepreneur who is willing to take risks and recognises the importance of developing a customer base (*the entrepreneur*). Networking and relationship building are deemed very important for business success. This can be seen in the way in which the entrepreneurial owner/manager makes an effort to visit overseas buyers in order to collect relevant export information. There is also a proactive tendency to develop skills and to monitor the environment for opportunities, as well as having the capacity to change direction if needed at short notice. Being part of a wider business and social network also assists in business development. As well as providing potential sales, craft fair attendance can also serve as a way of collecting information about the market and new product development. Ability to produce something unique is seen as a way to stimulate interest in the business. For some entrepreneurs, formal business training can complement their innate intuitive competencies:

I've picked up skills on the way - you have to learn but it's mostly common sense. You keep an eye on trends - it's a slow change. Look what's in other people's houses - the colours change. A few years ago it was rusty colours, now it's brighter...I'm quite flexible and able to move with the market...being small, I can adjust and change production...A lot of us were at the same college - we know each other. We can swap recipes and supplies. Most people are very open...I use craft fairs for market research. Last year I came up with three new ranges to take to fairs. It is test marketing...When people see something different, people will buy it. They want something different (Northern Ireland maker).

I did my degree in textiles - I did a foundation year at Carlisle and then that sort of directed me towards textiles, and then I came back to Belfast to do my degree at the art college. Most of my stuff is export. I started off initially by weaving fabric, just weaving bolts of fabric and selling that to the designer labels in Italy and France. Basically, just knocking on doors. I started my first contact through the Princes Trust. I got a grant from the Princes Trust to go to Italy, a travel grant. They put me in touch with one or two people in the textile trade who said, right

you should contact so and so. So it's basically by word of mouth. Meeting people who knew people who knew people (Northern Ireland maker).

The third type can be described as an artist/designer who is unwilling to view the craft as a product but as a creative piece (*the idealist*). Although they may have initially created craft in response to market demand, they have spent time considering their philosophical position. Their stance tends to be uncompromising when producing the work; they do not tend to take note of customer demand but instead make art/craft which they feel has artistic integrity. In other words, they embrace an 'Art for Art's sake' philosophy, rather than 'Art for Business sake'. They do take risks as far as the craft itself is concerned in order to break new ground and they can be innovative and certainly creative with the craft product. The idealist tends to sell their work either through a commercial gallery or by commission:

In the beginning I was doing traditional stuff, replicas and traditional looking stuff. And I suppose I moved towards my own style over the years...I would say that the main problem is the margin that the galleries are taking. Commission is great, as long as there is enough commission to keep us going. The galleries (commission) would be 40% plus vat so you can multiply what you want by 1.8... We have an exhibition at the very moment, my wife does stained glass, studio glass. A local exhibition, it's in a gallery not far away from us. A lot of stuff has been sold to local people, surprisingly. (Republic of Ireland maker).

There is a fourth type who may enter the industry much later than the other groups; they tend to have gained previous work experience in other areas, such as sales, and have decided to make a career change (*the late developer*). Depending on their background, a number of key skills can be brought into the new venture but the importance of lifestyle quality appears to be significant here too. This has relevance as far as expansion in terms of sales, markets and numbers being employed in the business are concerned. For

some, the opportunity to start a craft business was stimulated by unemployment. Some late developers exhibit ambition for international growth, while others are content to grow the business domestically. Although some makers have been active in the crafts for a while, it may only recently have turned from a part-time hobby into a full time career:

I had recently been made redundant, had time on my hands and just fancied having a go at making one, you know. It kind of developed from there. I don't sell abroad... I come originally, I suppose, from a sales, kind of marketing background... I'm a one man band - it's only relatively small fry...if you're canvassing for business, selling stuff, you're not going to get everybody. You don't get despondent. If one chap says no you just go with a positive attitude to the next person, and keep going. I've done some reasonably original stuff. (Republic of Ireland maker).

I'm not very young, I'm over 60 years of age, so it's developed over the last 30 years really. And it developed initially as a part time activity, as I've been a wood work teacher at the same time. It was just a hobby which developed. My sons, when they were growing up, took an interest in it and I was lucky that they worked themselves through college by working at it. It enlivened up the whole business after a good few years. I held on to it and developed it over the last 10/15 years by employing two full-time operatives to work with me. So I retired from teaching about 7/8 years ago. That's the position I'm in at the moment. I have done some exporting - about 90% of my production is sold in Ireland, in the Republic of Ireland. I have sent stuff to Liberty in London on two or three different occasions. But they don't come back and they don't repeat and then they get a notion that they want a bit more. This would be two years after the other one and so on. I've sent a few bits and pieces to Scotland and the North of Ireland and that's about it (Republic of Ireland maker).

Examination of the Celtic craft sector has unveiled a variety of intricate orientations, grounded in market-based and artist-centred based philosophies. Table 1 illustrates some of the characteristics found in the four craft business types:

Take in Table 1

Although analysis has identified these four groups of owner/manager characteristics it should be noted that they are not always mutually exclusive. Several characteristics can be found in more than one group although their interpretation varies: for instance, both the entrepreneur and the idealist are prepared to take risks. However, it is the nature of the risk that is inherently different. The former is prepared to indulge in risk taking at the business and product level, while the latter is really only concerned with artistic risk. By researching the Celtic craft sector, insight has been gained into how small firms can overcome sometimes severe resource constraints by drawing on their creative competencies. Rather than continually trying to persuade the firm to embrace Saxon representations of marketing it is sometimes preferable to encourage a more creative, nonlinear Celtic outlook which provides a better fit for actual business practice.

The Future's Bright; The Future's Celtic:

This paper began by highlighting the inadequacies of Saxon-based mainstream marketing thinking and then offered some thoughts on the merits of following a more creative, Celtic, approach to marketing. The Saxon-dominated marketing academy still seem intent on perpetuating linear representations of a single 'truth' while the realities of the business world are grounded on multiple interpretations of many realities. Insight into this alternative paradigm was gained by examining how Celtic craft businesses were able to overcome barriers to growth by exploiting sets of entrepreneurial marketing competencies. Given the continuation of the marketing theory/practice gap,

there is a greater need than ever to embrace imagination, creativity and intuition in marketing. The increasing influences of globalisation and technology effects mean that today's marketplaces are more crowded than ever before. Therefore, in order to stand any chance of being noticed, developing a creative orientation is seen as one of the best ways forward. Rather than being content to implement a form of marketing which has continually failed the purposes of business, a more experimental mode is called for where the central hard and soft competencies of the business owners are used to generate product-centred marketing initiatives. This approach clashes with the continual pandering to the customer where true innovation and creativity can be stifled. A distinction needs to be made between creativity and innovation. Creativity can occur for its own sake but innovation is driven by a need for profit. In the conventional sense, creativity can lead to innovative outcomes but in many industries, creativity for creativity's sake is actively discouraged because of time pressures and the perceived need for strategic control. Examination of the craft sector has shown that true creativity, grounded in artist/producer-led aesthetic philosophy can also lead to profitable outcomes through the entrepreneurial creation of demand rather than following the market.

Focusing on softer, qualitative Celtic dimensions such as networking, word of mouth marketing, building and sustaining relationships, opportunity recognition and the importance of reputation of the business and of the owner/manager as a form of branding are equally, if not more important factors than the formal processes of Saxon

marketing planning and strategy. By investigating under-researched industry sectors such as the crafts, insight can be gained into use of the imagination, dealing with uncertainty, lack of information, limited resources and ambiguity, as well as the importance of developing an individual style of marketing which best suits the needs of the organisation.

Ultimately, what is needed is a way forward for understanding subjective decision making where situation specific creative competencies impact on the form of marketing being practiced. Future research should investigate the possibilities of generating a Creative Marketing Paradigm, grounded in the Celtic marketing ethos of imagination, judgement, creativity and intuition, which can provide closer approximations to sets of truths and multiple realities.

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Table 1: Celtic Craft Business Owner/Manager Characteristics

<p style="text-align: center;">THE LIFESTYLER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • expansion of business not important • unwilling to take many risks • importance of Celtic quality of life • may or may not export; generally reactive • unwilling to follow business and marketing philosophy and develop related skills 	<p style="text-align: center;">THE ENTREPRENEUR</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • risk taker (in terms of carrying out business and with the craft product itself) • may or may not export - proactive • most likely to embrace own form of business and marketing philosophy in the longer term • realisation of importance of customer relationships/networking through fostering of Celtic form of marketing
<p style="text-align: center;">THE IDEALIST</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • risk taker (with the craft product) • unwilling to accept business and marketing philosophy • dominance of Celtic ‘Art for Art’s sake’ beliefs over Saxon ‘Art for Business sake’ • may or may not export • realisation of importance of establishing and building relationships and generating reputation • views self as artist rather than craftsperson 	<p style="text-align: center;">THE LATE DEVELOPER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • tends to come from non-creative background • less motivated to expand business; less likely to export • unlikely to accept ‘new’ ideas • believe in valuing own experience of business and life • able to bring ‘outside skills’ to the business • may find problems with accessing existing networks

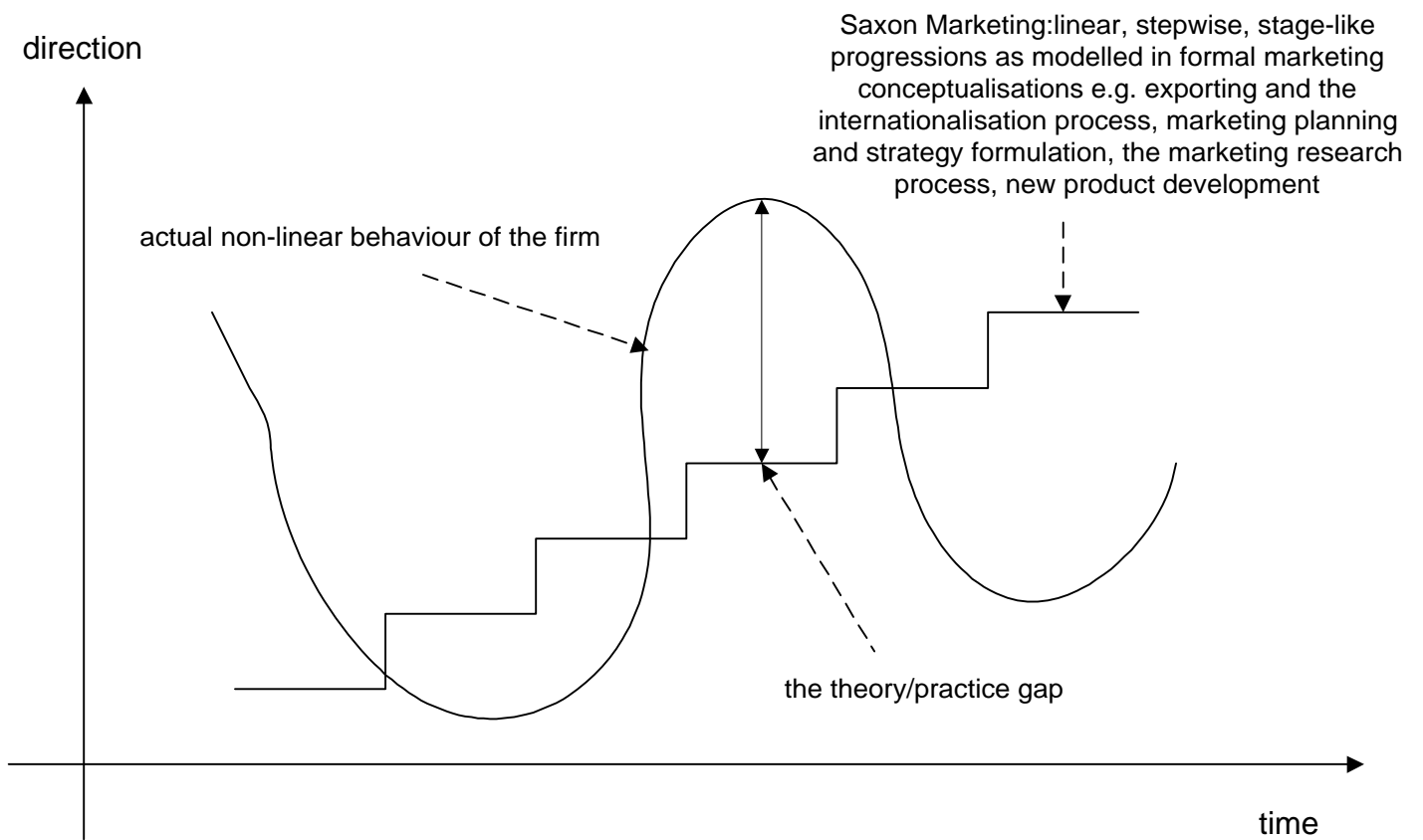


Figure 1: The Saxon Theory/Celtic Practice Gap

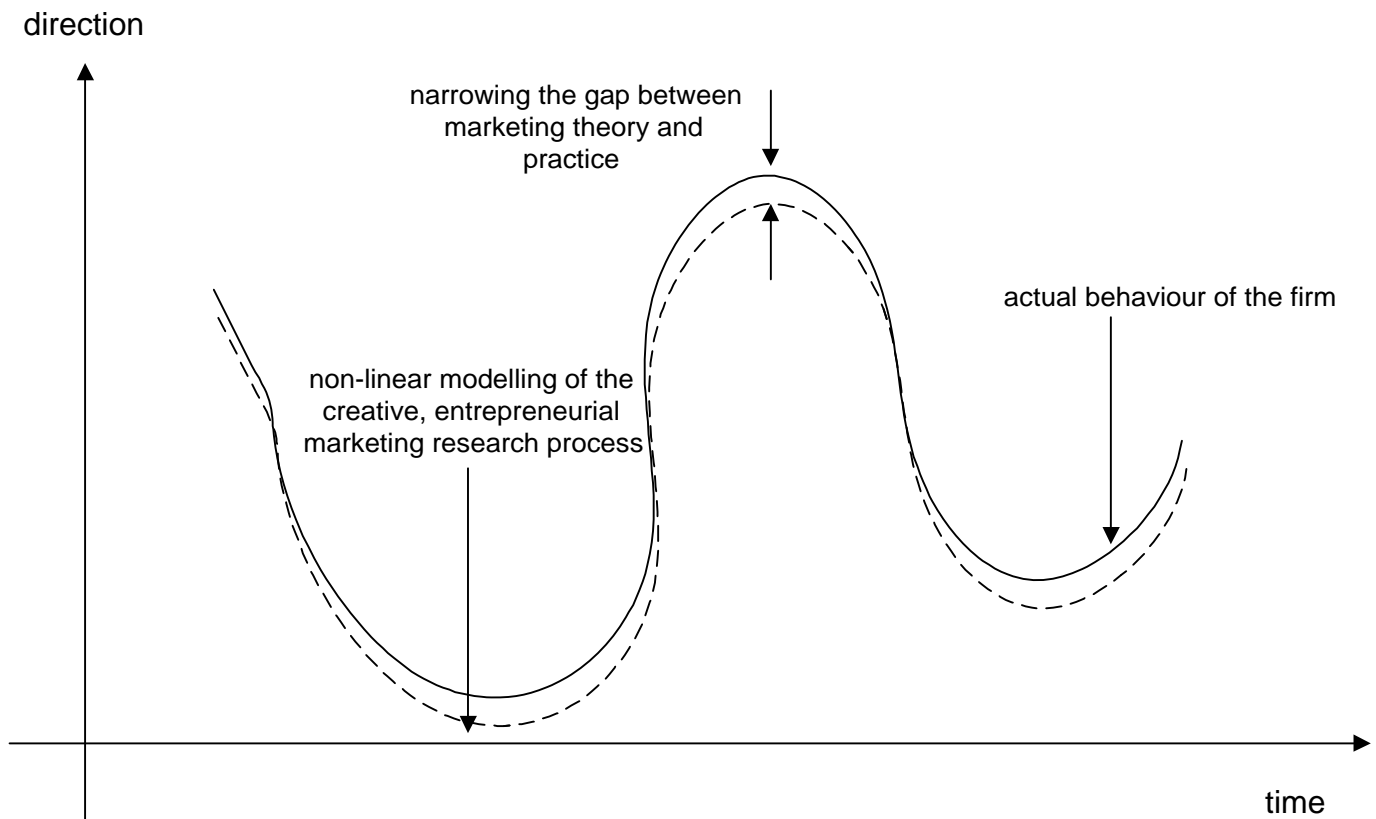


Figure 2: Closing The Marketing Theory/Practice Gap

