

Implementation-Based Thinking: A new approach to Marketing Strategy and the Marketing Planning Process

Introduction

“You have an excellent road map. Once you know the road map you can figure out how to get to most places using the existing roads. Knowledge of the existing world, and judgement to check that knowledge, allows us to use existing methods. But knowing a road map does not construct new roads. The past millennium of recognition, judgement, and discrimination allows us to use our knowledge but does not help to design new possibilities”. (Edward de Bono, “*New Thinking for the New Millennium*”).

Marketing planning is often viewed as a crucial part of business planning (or SBU planning). This, in turn is a subdivision of the overall organisation’s strategic planning. However, numerous experts now believe that in practice the much-vaunted benefits of formalised marketing planning as extolled by Jain or McDonald often fail to materialise. In 1992 Piercy argued that the formalised and conceptual view of marketing planning did not reflect the links between the planning process, analysis, strategy or programs. Symkin (1996), however, states that while Piercy is likely to be correct in his assertion, without careful organisation and pre-planning, it is unlikely that a marketing planning program will be effective.

Piercy also focuses on the need to facilitate implementation, outlining the lack of attention devoted to the implementation in practice of both marketing strategies and marketing mix programs. His statement that “implementation is strategy” and that chief executives “should reject out-of-hand any marketing plan of any kind which does not come with a detailed and realistic implementation strategy”, emphasises the importance he places on implementation.

One of the key conclusions arrived at by leading exponents of marketing planning such as Piercy, Jain, Greenley and McDonald, (and by implication, marketing strategy formulation and development), is that marketing planning must be managed. These exponents conclude that even before planning commences, the exercise must be carefully planned with the associated logistical and behavioural considerations included.

Piercy (1992) argues that too much focus is given to techniques and formal methods in marketing strategy and management research, rather than ensuring ideas are implemented and marketing managers actions generally progress. Changes to the new business landscape are now an everyday occurrence, and change is described by Dr Susan Mehrtens (1996), in her book *The New Business Landscape*, as being “holistic and global”. Mehrtens states further that change is becoming discontinuous, non-linear, so that the future can no longer be anticipated by extrapolating from current conditions.

With regard to competition, Mehrtens cites the importance of understanding the new meaning of existing terms. For example, Mehrtens states that the old meaning of *competition*: rivalry between companies offering similar products or services now needs to be replaced by the new meaning of “anything that cuts into your market share” (most especially, rigid, or myopic ways of thinking). Another example is the old meaning of customer: the person who buys your product or service, as distinct from the new meaning of “the individual responsible for the success of the business”.

If the predictions and assumptions of these leading exponents are correct (and society is witnessing these changes daily), then why is so little attention given to implementation, particularly from a strategic perspective? According to de Bono (1999), even education is obsessed with literacy and numeracy, yet “operacy” (the skills of doing) is almost entirely neglected. Just as in the field of education, organisations (and the marketing strategist in particular), should be concerned with the “creation of value” for both the organisation, the brand and the consumer, who is an integral part of the process.

The dynamic nature of the new business landscape requires a new approach to the process of marketing strategy (and even business strategy), formulation, development and implementation. New simplistic, highly adaptable business models must embrace the rapid nature of change, and promote a holistic simultaneous embracing of creativity, innovation and implementation. No longer is there the realistic luxury of time in terms of conducting a detailed SWOT analysis, Key Issue analysis, setting generic objectives, and following the mundane process according to Ansoff’s matrix, followed by a classical segmentation of the market, positioning within selected target markets, and applying a marketing mix. The time has come for something new.

Many articles have highlighted the problems associated with strategy implementation, one notably the article written jointly by Michael Beer and Russell Eisenstat published in the Sloan Management Review, and entitled “The Silent Killers of Strategy Implementation and Learning”. In this article they highlight the difficulties of implementation, citing the fact that senior managers “get lulled into believing that a well-conceived strategy communicated to the organisation equals implementation”. They state further that senior managers approach change in a narrow, non-systemic and programmatic manner that does not address root causes. Using an Action Learning method they developed their “Organisation Fitness Profiling model, a process which provides a window for understanding deeply rooted barriers that are common to an array of companies.

According to Jerry Wind (2000), the new paradigm of marketing in the information age, traditional industry focus is replaced with focus on a truly borderless company that spans traditional industry lines. He cites the example of the new information industry that fuses hardware, software, telecommunications, consumer electronics and other related industries. Other important shifts stated, are from the mass-market to “segments of one” mentality, made possible by the enormous advances in database marketing and mass customisation in recent years.

Another important factor, which highlights the necessity for placing more emphasis on implementation, is contained in the book by Emanuel Rosen, entitled “The Anatomy of Buzz”. According to Rosen, buzz is all the word of mouth about a brand. It’s the aggregate of all person-to-person communication about a particular product, service, or company at any point in time. Why is understanding the power of buzz important – it is because people (and consumers) all around the world constantly exchange comments about everything, from golf to the meaning of life.

Buzz travels in invisible networks and travels extremely rapidly, accelerated by the power of the Internet. Buzz can be positive or negative, and can have a devastating effect on an organisation. If this “buzz” is becoming a daily occurrence, then this further emphasises the importance for effective and speedy implementation. Perhaps the reason for the lack of successful implementation lies in the fact that “implementation” is the ugly sister of innovation. Tony Manning (2001), in his book “Making Sense of Strategy”, emphasises that survival and success depend on innovation. So, according to Manning, strategy has to be about:

1. Being alert to change (anticipation)
2. Seeing opportunities to offer something different and new (insight)
3. Dreaming up new ways of doing it (imagination)
4. Doing it consistently and to the highest standards (execution)

By implication, this implies a holistic, integrated and circular approach to the process of marketing strategy development and implementation.

Towards a New Conceptual Approach

The importance of marketing (and business) strategy implementation forms the starting point of this new conceptual approach to the process of marketing strategy implementation. Given the facts that business operates in a dynamic and ever-changing environment, and that one of the major causes of failed marketing campaigns is a lack of successful implementation, the writer postulates that marketing strategy should focus simultaneously on both marketing innovation and marketing implementation.

In this regard and by way of an illustration, an example is used of a tennis player competing in the finals at Wimbledon. The player has just taken his serve and leads by five games to four in the final set, and has reached match point on his opponents serve. His total focus is on one thing – anticipating where his opponent will place his serve, the probability of where he will likely serve, the anticipated pace of the serve, options available in terms of returning the serve, and so on. **Everything** is focused on the *end result*, everything is focused on that single event, and *everything* is focused on *implementation*.

Nothing is focused on analysis; everything is focused on *design* and *implementation*. However, the process of implementation did not occur in isolation. The opponent has been analysed (however briefly), in one way or another, prior to and during the match. Strengths and weaknesses (both self and opponents), have been compared based on a variety of methods, and have been discussed with his coach. Strategies and tactics have been agreed and contingency plans set in place. But the focus has always been on *implementation*.

What has been applied is a conceptual approach, which is extremely simplistic, yet highly effective if applied correctly. This approach is referred to by the writer as “*implementation-based thinking*”, or IBT for short.

Briefly described, implementation-based thinking is a new conceptual approach that focuses simultaneously on both the creative aspects and the implementation requirements of marketing strategy. IBT embraces systems thinking and involves developing the ability to see all the parts and the whole collectively in terms of the marketing strategy process, and understand how these parts are related, and the impact of these critical interrelationships between all parts in the marketing planning system. Fundamental to the understanding of IBT is the alignment of both *thinking*, as an active process, and *action* as a result of this thinking process.

Systems’ thinking requires the ability to take multiple perspectives when looking at any situation, such as the development of a new marketing strategy, and then to integrate the knowledge gained from these perspectives in understanding how complex interrelationships give rise to the observed behaviour of the system. According to Michael Smith (2001), an individual engaged in systems thinking must constantly be integrating multiple perspectives. This entails obtaining, refining, understanding and testing what is observed, in other words thinking in this sense is learning.

The lack of a systems-thinking approach is often a major cause of failure of marketing strategy implementation. By this I mean that due consideration is often not always given to all the component parts within the system, as well as the role-players involved in the marketing strategy development and implementation process. For example, the marketing team may receive an urgent brief from the sales team to research and launch a new brand to counter a competitor invasion of their market. The brief requires the marketing team to come up with a really creative idea to counter the competition. Thereafter, everything is vested in the creativity (or lack of creativity) of the marketing team. Brainstorming sessions are held; the creative team works throughout many nights together with the ad agency, and finally a new brand is born.

Other role-players within the organisation are now *summoned* to hurried meetings, and within a very short time the new brand is launched, only to find that there are numerous unaccounted for factors that now need to be considered prior to the actual launch. The IBT systemic view of managing the marketing strategy process does not focus on outcome as a mere singular event, but rather on *learning* about the *relationships* that will produce the most effective outcome. IBT takes a wider and more holistic view of the marketing strategy process, adopting an integrative team approach, rather than an independent mechanistic approach.

The conceptual framework of IBT embraces Action Learning as the fundamental methodology for its execution. However, IBT differs from the traditional Action Learning approach in two distinct ways:

1. The focus is centred on the future result, i.e., effective implementation, and
2. The “team”, i.e., the marketing team, is greater than the sum of its individual parts

IBT furthermore implies a move away from using Action Learning as a mere problem solving technique, to using the methodology at a more strategic “visionary” level. This means that IBT starts with the *vision* and not the *problem*, and the focus therefore is on achieving the vision, which is a more positive mental action than that of general problem solving. IBT utilises a similar learning approach as does Action Learning by creating a collaborative learning culture in order to achieve the ultimate objective of effective implementation.

Marketing managers (and managers in general), often fail to engage in systemic management thinking because our culture values *action* more than *reflection*. However, true learning only occurs when reflection takes place, and one of the objectives of any marketing strategy campaign should be to ensure that effective learning takes place during the marketing planning and implementation process.

According to Zuber-Skerritt (2002), successful Action Learning programs are primarily concerned with the quality of the learning process, rather than with a preoccupation to maximise the quantity of products, outputs, profits or remuneration. The latter have proven to follow anyway as a consequence of ongoing organisational and management practice. IBT, due to its dual and simultaneous focus on both the future result, i.e., effective implementation, and the integrated team approach, has the capacity to overcome any criticisms of the traditional Action Learning process. Furthermore, IBT embraces the traditional concepts as postulated by the late Reg Revans, who many describe as the father of Action Learning.

The writer postulates that IBT takes the traditional concept of Action Learning to a new dimension within the framework of marketing strategy (and business strategy), and that this new dimension of focusing on both

creativity successful implementation simultaneously is highly relevant within a dynamic and changing business environment. IBT utilises the principles and concepts of Action Learning not only from an educational and pure learning perspective, but also from a business perspective. IBT is therefore aligned to both business objectives from a marketing perspective such as successful marketing campaigns that result in increased sales and profits, but also from an organizational learning perspective through its collaborative team approach. IBT focuses on the future marketing vision and objectives of the organisation, and then creates the framework and process to realise the vision and objectives.

Organisation of Implementation-Based Thinking

The changing nature of the competitive business landscape as stated previously, shortening product life cycles, and the entire pace of business life and decision making, necessitates a simpler and more effective way of creating competitive advantage. Competitive advantages are often short-lived, and marketing strategy therefore needs to focus on creating proactive innovation and successful implementation in the shortest possible time available.

Marketing strategy can no longer merely be left to the marketing department without the involvement of other key role players within the organisation. IBT, by definition implies a collaborative thinking process that requires all parties involved with, and likely to be impacted upon, by the marketing strategy decisions made by the marketing team. IBT is conceptually designed to be both strategic and pro-active, but can also be applied to a reactive marketing when necessary. IBT complements and simplifies the traditional marketing strategy analysis and planning process by proactively aligning innovation and implementation using the power of Action Learning as the underlying methodology.

The Process of Implementation-Based Thinking

The selection of the team is a critical component of the process and consideration must be given to all members likely to be affected by marketing strategy decisions. The team should be restricted to between 5-8 key members, but should not necessarily be restricted to senior managers.

The process thereafter is relatively straightforward, and requires a rigid discipline by all participants on the one hand, but a simultaneous awareness of the critical role of all participants as team members on the other hand, in order to ensure success. In simple terms the process requires creating the “vision” or the “mind visual” and then working towards this vision by viewing creativity and implementation simultaneously and not as distinct and different component parts. The team therefore becomes both the creators and the implementers of the new marketing vision. Their total involvement ensures creativity, trust, honesty, focus, and most importantly commitment to successful implementation.

The process involves a holistic, systemic-thinking approach to marketing strategy, which includes communication based on collaborative communication and participation between all team members involved. Time frames are created jointly using a simple process of “agreed realism” and “agreed implementation”. Fundamental to the process are the critical questioning and reflection components of the Action Learning methodology, which produce both single and double loop learning, but the paramount objective remains focused on achieving successful implementation of the marketing strategy.

A further critical objective of the IBT process is to generate courage amongst the team members – courage to admit when there are deviations from the agreed realism or the agreed implementation, and to take immediate steps to rectify the situation. Reflection and modification are the final steps in the IBT process and are important steps in the overall evaluation process.

Benefits of IBT

- A simultaneous focus on both creativity and implementation
- A collaborative approach that will lead to improved team motivation
- A proactive focus on the future from a marketing perspective
- Speeding up both the creative and implementation process of marketing strategy
- Committed marketing team due to involvement of key role players
- Creation of competitive advantage

Summary

In this paper the writer postulates a new approach to marketing strategy development and implementation referred to as Implementation-Based Thinking. IBT embraces the core methodology of Action Learning, but creates a new dimension to this methodology by focusing on the marketing vision and business objectives of the organisation from a strategic marketing perspective and not merely on solving problems.

The IBT process is dynamic and involves all key role players in the marketing strategy development and implementation process, and is designed to ensure that true learning and team motivation occur as a result of the process.

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