

Is Marketing Becoming a Dirty Word? A Longitudinal Study of Public Perceptions of Marketing

Frédéric Dalsace and Dmitri G. Markovitch^{*†}

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* Frédéric Dalsace is Associate Professor of Marketing at HEC-Paris and holds the Danone Chair in Social Business, Firm and Poverty, 1, rue de la Libération, 78351 Jouy en Josas cedex, France, Ph. 33.1.39.67.73.12, Fax 33.1.39.67.70.87, dalsace@hec.fr. Dmitri G. Markovitch is Assistant Professor of Marketing and Economics at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, 110 8th Street, Troy, NY 12180, Ph. 518-276-2197, Fax 518-276-8661, markod@rpi.edu.

† The authors contributed equally to this project. The names are listed in alphabetical order.

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Abstract

There is growing sentiment in the marketing community that our society holds an increasingly unfavorable view of the marketing profession. However, this sentiment is largely based on anecdotal and experiential evidence. In response, the authors use content analysis of the general press to investigate the American public's current and past attitudes towards marketing. They obtain compelling evidence that the public's attitude towards marketing has deteriorated over the past twenty years. They observe a similar trend in how marketing is treated in the American business press and in blogs. Next, the authors replicate their analyses on news media from another Western society, France, where marketing activity is subject to greater regulation than in the United States. In discussing the results, they propose that the marketing profession will evolve through a mix of three distinct practices that they name ego-marketing, techno-marketing and alter-marketing. The authors argue that marketing's image in the population will ultimately depend on the growth and strength of each practice within this mix, with techno-marketing playing a pivotal role. They conclude by reflecting on the role that marketing scholars can play in this evolution.

Keywords: marketing practice, marketing image, perception of marketing

“Marketing effectiveness is down... People resent marketing. Marketing has no seat at the table at the board level and top management. Academics aren’t relevant. And we have an ethical and moral crisis. Other than that, I think we are in good shape.”

—Glen Urban, quoted in Sheth and Sisodia (2005a, p. 10)

Marketing sources and authoritative references broadly define marketing as the sum of socially-beneficial activities that “promote and facilitate exchange” (e.g., Encyclopedia Britannica Online 2008). In particular, marketing’s central function is to identify and satisfy customer needs, thus improving the quality of life and increasing social welfare (Kotler and Keller 2009; Wilkie and Moore 1999). Given marketing’s constructive nature, one would expect a favorable view of the discipline¹ in our society. It is counter-intuitive, therefore, to see traditional media and internet sites peppered with more than occasional disparaging references to marketing activity and marketers. Although such occurrences are by no means suggestive or alarming in isolation, their persistence might signal a worrisome transformation in how the public perceives our profession. Indeed, a growing number of marketing academics and practitioners express a belief that the negative change is well under way (e.g., Sheth and Sisodia 2005a; Winer 2006).

It stands to reason that the public’s perception of marketing may evolve, because marketing activity reflects dynamically regulatory, demographic, technological and cultural changes in society. In fact, marketing academics already report substantial shifts in the functioning and perception of marketers within firms that should give us pause. In particular, there appears to be a “marked fall-off in the influence, stature and significance of the corporate marketing department” (Webster, Malter, and Ganesan 2005, p. 35; also Verhoef and Leeflang 2009). The marketing function at the business unit level is also experiencing a retrenchment of sorts, with its scope of influence being reduced primarily to advertising and marketing research decisions (Homburg, Workman and Krohmer 1999). It is hardly surprising then that firms compensate marketers 10%-30% less on average than their manufacturing and finance counterparts, in line with marketers’ perceived contributions (Pfeffer 1994). Internationally, marketers’ position appears to be equally

¹ We use the terms “activity,” “discipline” and “profession” interchangeably in this research.

tenuous. For example, a recent *McKinsey Quarterly* article reports that almost all of the 30 European CEOs interviewed expressed dissatisfaction with the business acumen of their marketers (Cassidy, Freeling and Kiewell 2005).

The Marketing Science Institute has acknowledged these issues by designating the topics of marketing's organizational role, contribution to firm performance and metrics, among its research priorities in recent years. Academics and practitioners answered the call by producing valuable insights and frameworks (e.g., Deshpandé, Farley and Webster 2002; Kohli and Jaworski 1990; Lorange 2005; Moorman and Rust 1999). It is surprising, however, that very little empirical research has investigated the important and intimately related problem of popular attitude towards marketing. Consequently, our knowledge of this matter is largely anecdotal or experiential.

Notably, only two empirical studies shed direct light on American consumers' attitudes towards marketing.² Smith, Clurman and Wood (2004) present a Yankelovich Partners survey in which 36% of 601 respondents expressed a negative opinion about marketing, whereas 28% had a positive view. In the same survey, 60% of respondents agreed with the statement that their perception of marketing deteriorated in recent years. The latter result is particularly noteworthy, because it suggests a negative trend in popular attitudes towards marketing that warrants further investigation.

In a similar vein, Sheth, Sisodia and Barbulescu (2006) report that 65% of 973 respondents to their online survey displayed a negative attitude towards marketing and only 8% were positive. They measure attitude as negative, positive or neutral based on the valence of five unprompted words respondents were asked to associate with marketing. They also find that marketers in general enjoy an average reputation among other professions, with a mean rating of 2.74 on a 5-point scale. However, some marketing professions were perceived worse than others. For example, sales people

² The composite Index of Consumer Sentiment towards Marketing (ICST) (e.g., Gaski and Etzel 2005) is a valuable measure of household sector sentiment towards a range of marketing and non-marketing *decisions*, such as product quality, price levels and store merchandising. However, it is conceptually different from the notion of consumers' attitude towards marketing. That the index is largely inconsistent with more direct measures of consumers' attitudes towards marketing utilized in the 2004 Yankelovich Partners survey, Sheth et al. (2006) and the current paper, suggests that the ICST does not capture popular perceptions of marketing per se.

received a rating of 2.41, just below lawyers rated at 2.56. In contrast, accountants and advertising professionals were rated at 3.22 and 2.98, respectively.

These studies are important, because they provide initial empirical evidence that marketing's problems extend beyond its organizational role and image. Unfortunately, both surveys rely on consumer samples that are not readily generalizable to the population at large, at least in the context of the current topic. Yankelovich Partners surveyed a sample of paid marketing research participants. Sheth et al. used a convenience sample of acquaintances of their MBA students. Moreover, it is difficult to evaluate the results, as the latter authors do not discuss how they constructed their composite measure of attitude.

The two studies' limitations underscore the remaining research agenda. A better assessment of marketing's current popular perception would serve to stimulate the ongoing debate about our discipline's condition. More important, a better understanding of how the popular attitude towards marketing has evolved over the years may have immediate policy implications.—A discovery that the society's current perception of marketing is in line with its past perception would support the view held by some academics that marketing's problems are moderate in gravity and addressable through relatively minor policy changes (e.g., Hunt 2006; Ringold 2006; Stewart 2006). In contrast, findings showing a deteriorating trend would support growing calls for a fundamental reform in how marketing is taught and practiced (Malhotra, Wu, and Allvine 2006; Sheth et al. 2006; Urban 2005).

An examination of how attitudes towards marketing have evolved is of particular importance, because unnecessary change would be counterproductive, yet the price of inaction looms higher. On a personal level, marketers eventually stand to lose social stature and self-esteem in line with a highly negative and deteriorating public view of the profession. Marketing's continued decline in the public eye may lead the more ethical people or more capable people, who have wider career choices, to eschew marketing for other careers, thus setting off a vicious cycle. There would also be a broader societal impact. Social welfare would decrease if firms have

difficulty convincing consumers of the integrity of their marketing claims. Then, more resources would need to be devoted to product promotion, leaving fewer resources available for other beneficial activities, such as innovation.

Therefore, the current article makes a contribution to the marketing profession by addressing two important research questions. First, what is the discrepancy between a normatively positive attitude towards marketing, as defined by its beneficial social role, and the actual popular attitude, as reflected in the American news media? In the course of this exploration, we also compare and contrast the popular perception of marketing with marketing's exposition in the business press. And second, how has the popular attitude evolved in recent years? We provide additional insights into these issues by drawing empirical parallels with marketing's perception in another developed economy, France, that subjects marketing activity to greater regulation than the United States.

We address our research questions by investigating the evolution of the contextual valence of the term "marketing" in the American press over the past two decades. As part of our sensitivity analyses, we also evaluate marketing's current image in blogs that are a more informal, grassroots medium than the press. We obtain compelling evidence that marketing's public perception in the US has become more negatively valenced over the measurement period. We also find that marketing's treatment in the American business press parallels this trend. This negative sentiment towards marketing appears to be even more pronounced in the French society. In a worrisome development, we observe that in both languages, the word "marketing" is acquiring an additional semantic connotation of "hype" that is detrimental to our profession.

The rest of this article is organized as follows. First we report our main empirical results. Next we present sensitivity analyses. The discussion follows. It summarizes marketers' arguments in defense of the current status of the profession, and presents our view of how marketing may evolve in the future. We conclude by reflecting on our responsibilities as marketing scholars.

Main Findings

Method and Data

Mass media play an important role in shaping the public agenda and opinion. A powerful reverse influence also exists whereby public opinion and perceptions find their reflection in the topics and tone adopted by the media (e.g., Habermas 1974). Indeed, content analysis of news media has repeatedly produced results that are equivalent to those from attitude surveys and opinion polls in various domains (e.g., Fan 1997; Gamson and Modigliani 1989; Parlour and Schatzow 1978). This has led professionals and academics to advocate the use of content analysis of mass media as a useful approach to monitoring changes in public opinion and even measuring the impact of firm actions (e.g., Bengston, Fan and Celarier 1999; Hauss 1993). The greatest advantage of using content analysis of news media in addressing our research questions, though, is that it allows us to evaluate public attitudes towards marketing retrospectively, thus making possible a longitudinal analysis of marketing perceptions.

It is important to note, however, that, whereas we can view the marketing's image and narrative tone in the general press as a straightforward reflection of our society's attitudes towards marketing, its image and narrative tone in the business press likely cannot be interpreted as reflecting only perceptions of business professionals. Business reporters are influenced by a mix of contacts, including business executives. At the same time, they are fully exposed to the sentiment of their colleagues and society in general. Therefore, business reporters' references to marketing are likely to reflect a mix of popular and business professionals' attitudes.

We conduct longitudinal content analysis of the general and business press to assess marketing's image at three points in time, in 1987, 1997 and 2007. To this end, we evaluate the contextual valence of the noun "marketing" in articles published in the top 50 United States newspapers (available as a search option in Factiva database). The publications list includes one national general-interest newspaper, The USA Today, two national business newspapers, The Wall Street Journal and Investor's Business Daily, and 47 major local newspapers, such as The

Sacramento Bee and The Dallas Morning News. All the general-interest newspapers feature a large business section. We collectively refer to the business newspapers and business sections in other newspapers as the business press.³

A search of the Factiva database using the single term “marketing” produces 19,868, 38,928 and 26,735 hits per year in 1987, 1997 and 2007, respectively.⁴ These numbers include some republished news (that cannot be automatically excluded, because of variations in the title), newspaper abstracts and instances where “marketing” is part a newspaper section title.

Our pilot study of articles published in 2006 reveals that over half of all articles refer to marketing in a non-valenced, fact-based context, such as references to marketing expenditures or announcements of career changes. Because we obtain no new information from content-analysis of such items, we seek to gain a measure of efficiency by eliminating a large proportion of neutral articles from further consideration while retaining most of the articles that are likely to contain valenced observations.

Based on our learnings from the pilot study, we therefore screen out articles in which “marketing” is used in conjunction with a person’s occupation or title and certain entities, such as “consultancy” or “association.” This allows us to distill our sampling frame to 3,657, 7,105 and 5,501 hits for 1987, 1997 and 2007, respectively.⁵

Next we draw a simple random sample of 1,400 articles for each year of interest. This corresponds to over 25% of the pre-screened articles from 1987 and 2007, and 20% of the articles from 1997. To minimize a possible rater bias, we mask the publication dates and assign to each article a unique identifier.

³ Our analyses show no material difference between business publications and business sections of general newspapers with respect to the contextual tone of the word “marketing.”

⁴ The number of references to marketing in the top 50 U.S. newspapers increased steadily between 1987 and 2000, but declined somewhat thereafter. References to other business fields, such as management, display a similar trend. Therefore, we do not believe that the observed pattern reflects the public’s waning interest in marketing activity.

⁵ We verify the efficacy of our filter by duplicating our analyses on random samples of articles from 1987 and 2007 that contain “marketing” and the excluded terms. These samples contain 50%-70% fewer valenced observations than our pre-screened samples discussed below and produce results that are consistent with our general findings.

Given our research objectives, we are only interested in instances where the word “marketing” is a common noun. Such a noun can be used syntactically as a subject, object or a modifier. We ignore instances where “marketing” is a continuous tense of the verb “to market.” We also bypass republished news, abstracts and instances where “marketing” is part of a company name or a newspaper section title. As a result, our 1987 sample yields for content analysis 869 articles with 1,059 mentions of “marketing;” the 1997 sample yields 901 articles with 1,012 mentions; and the 2007 sample yields 863 articles with 1,121 mentions. Although some articles contain multiple mentions of “marketing,” we treat each observation separately, without averaging or aggregation.⁶

We employed three native English speakers with university degrees in language arts to content-analyze the articles. Prior to beginning, we conducted training with the raters in which we also calibrated our rating scales through joint discussion and analysis. Using the standard linguistics technique of bracketing (e.g., Williams 1981), the raters bracket, or section off for analysis, syntactically integral modifier(s)-head noun combinations containing “marketing.” Next they use a 7-point scale anchored by “strongly negative” (-3) and “strongly positive” (3) to rate the valence of the bracketed combination *as it reflects on the marketing activity or subject of the bracketed phrase*, given the surrounding paragraph(s). This approach assumes that the valence of any word or phrase is context-dependent. We provide examples of our consensus ratings in Appendix A. We believe these examples also illustrate the intricacy of the analysis task.

We test inter-rater reliability on a random sample of 150 articles using the Perreault and Leigh (1989) measure. Our average inter-rater agreement of 74% is above the 70% benchmark recommended for exploratory research. The raters’ test-retest reliabilities of over 90% are similarly adequate.

[Table 1 and Figure 1 here please]

⁶ Our approach avoids a loss of information associated with an alternate approach of averaging valence scores for each article. Robustness checks show that using average scores for each article does not affect our conclusions.

Results

Panel A of Table 1 shows frequencies and proportions of negative, neutral and positive references to marketing in the general and business press for each year under study. It also reports mean valence ratings without neutral observations.—The inclusion of neutral observations in analyses is problematic, because their frequency in the data set varies with search terms used as a filter, which directly impacts results. In contrast, statistical comparisons of only valenced observations are largely unaffected by our data screening procedures and would most likely produce identical results if a census of the press was employed. We henceforth primarily compare and contrast the proportions of valenced observations. That said, the proportions of neutral mentions are comparable across the years, because we use the same criteria and filters to construct the samples. We make comparisons of neutral mentions where appropriate. Panel A of Figure 1 visually summarizes valenced observations by year and type of press.

The statistics show an unmistakable negative trend in marketing's exposition in the general and business press. Negative references to marketing as a proportion of all valenced references increased steadily from 1987 to 2007; positive references as a fraction of valenced references declined; and, the public's view of marketing has become more negatively charged overall, as reflected in the shrinking proportions of neutral references and more negative mean valence scores.

Specifically, the general public had a strictly neutral perception of marketing in 1987: the proportions of negative to positive mentions stood at 52% to 48%; 7% of valenced mentions were distinctly negative (-2 or -3) and 8% were distinctly positive (+2 or +3); the mean valence score (computed without neutral observations here and elsewhere for the reasons outlined above) was -.03, not significantly different from zero. In contrast, the business press exposed marketing in a favorable light in 1987.—Only 16% of valenced mentions were negative, whereas 84% were positive (test of proportion $p < .001$). The mean valence score was .75, which is significantly greater than zero ($p < .001$). Yet, as might be expected from the business press, the overall tone was

rather muted. There were no distinctly negative mentions, and only 4 mentions were distinctly positive (all rated as +2).

There was a moderate, but meaningful shift in the public's perception of marketing over the following decade. In 1997, 56% of valenced references to marketing were negative and 44% were positive ($p < .05$). That included 12% of strongly negative mentions and 7% of strongly positive mentions ($p = .06$). The relative frequency of neutral mentions decreased by 11 percentage points, compared with 1987, and the mean valence score decreased to $-.18$, which is significantly lower than zero ($p < .05$). Surprisingly, marketing's image in the business press experienced a dramatic decline over the same time period and became essentially neutral: 48% of valenced mentions were negative and 52% positive. The proportion of distinctly negative mentions (16%) actually exceeded distinctly positive mentions (4%) (Fisher exact test $p < .1$). The mean valence score was $-.06$, which is not significantly different from zero.

The erosion of marketing's image continued into the 2000s. Neutral mentions of marketing in the general press decreased by three percentage points between 1997 and 2007. Almost two-thirds (64%) of all valenced mentions of marketing that appeared in the general press in 2007 were negative. The proportion of distinctly negative mentions increased from 12% in 1997 to 17% in 2007, whereas the proportion of distinctly positive mentions remained unchanged at 8%. All the differences between positive and negative proportions are statistically significant at $p < .001$. The mean valence score of references to marketing decreased accordingly over the past decade, from $-.18$ to $-.39$ ($p = .06$). Furthermore, the exposition of marketing in the business press has become largely negative as well. Neutral mentions decreased by five percentage points; 58% of valenced references to marketing were negative, while 42% were positive (ns). Moreover, 13% of the valenced references were distinctly negative and only 3% distinctly positive ($p < .05$). Also, the mean score of valenced mentions in the business press has deteriorated to $-.27$. This score is significantly lower than zero ($p < .05$).

[Table 2 here please]

Table 2 shows the most frequently used first modifiers and head nouns, besides “marketing.” We do not report on the frequency of second modifiers, because no word, other than “marketing,” was used more than twice. In a negative context, “marketing” is most commonly referred to as “aggressive,” “manipulative” and “misleading.” This suggests that marketing’s troubles are less likely due to the pervasiveness of marketing communications that lead to audience fatigue, but rather the irresponsible and inappropriate tactics that are, unfortunately, too common in consumer markets. A gamut of less frequent, but similarly unflattering modifiers, such as “abusive,” “deceptive” and “insidious,” reinforce this conclusion. The recent housing crisis in the United States is a noteworthy case in point. Millions of Americans lived through the tragedy of losing their home in large part because the lending industry aggressively marketed loans to un-creditworthy borrowers (e.g., Gordon 2008).

A further review of negative references to marketing also reveals multiple instances where marketing is exposed as a high-pitch, but ultimately barren activity synonymous with “hype.” (We present one such instance in the Appendix.) This new connotation of marketing is particularly pronounced in current blog posts that we address in the following section.

Despite the frequently negative valence of the context in which the word “marketing” appears, we also find a silver lining. The most common positive references to marketing, such as “clever,” “wise” and “sophisticated,” underscore our discipline’s creative nature and image improvement potential.

Additional Analyses

Public Perception of Management

To address the possibility that our results reflect a decline in the public’s perception of business activity in general, we next evaluate change in the contextual valence of “management” that occurred between 1987 and 2007. We focus on “management” for two reasons. First, this term encompasses a broad range of business activities across functional areas. Second, similar to

marketing, management is also an academic discipline, which may conceivably affect how the public views management.

Using the same procedure and filters as the main study, we draw two random samples of 100 articles containing the word management. Our subsequent content analysis shows a very low and temporally stable incidence of valenced references to management in the general press.—We identify four valenced mentions of management in 1987 and two such mentions in 2007, with a mean valence score of .1 and .2, respectively. Therefore, we do not find any significant or directional evidence that the public’s perception of management deteriorated over the past two decades.

Marketing’s Image in Blogs

Next we seek to gain further insights into the current perception of marketing by content-analyzing articles and posts appearing in blogs, which are a more informal, grassroots medium than the traditional press. Because of their democratic nature—anyone can be a blogger—blogs are largely unrestrained in expression and subject matter. As such, they complement the general press by providing a more unrefined view of marketing than is carried in major newspapers.

We subscribed to the blog clipping service from Cision US Inc. from December 10, 2007 to March 9, 2008. Using the same filters as the main study, we obtained 959 mentions of marketing in 425 unique blog articles and posts that appeared in non-business, general-interest blogs monitored by Cision.⁷ Consistent with our procedure, we omitted from analysis 117 instances where “marketing” is a not a common noun to arrive at the final sample of 842 observations. We summarize our content-analysis results in Table 1.

We found the bloggers’ treatment of marketing to be fully consistent with the observed contemporaneous general press coverage, yet more pronounced. Only 53% of blog references to marketing are neutral, compared with 62% in the contemporaneous general press ($p < .001$).

Although the obtained relative proportions of negative and positive mentions are similar to those in

⁷ Cision is the nation’s leading media intelligence provider monitoring over 20,000 most visited blogs and web pages daily.

the general press, they must be interpreted in light of bloggers' professional affiliations. Negative references to marketing come from bloggers of various backgrounds. Conversely, we estimate that half of the distinctly positive (rated as +2 or +3) posts, in fact, came from self-identified marketing professionals or individuals whose command of marketing concepts points to their likely marketing background. Therefore, the actual perception of marketing in the general public is likely to be more negative than reflected in our blog-based results.

Marketing's Image in France

Additionally, we conducted a small-scale study of marketing's perception in France to assess whether our results replicate in another country. France is similar to the United States in that it is a developed capitalist economy in which the public has long been exposed to a full spectrum of marketing activities and tactics. Yet, greater regulation of marketing activity, particularly advertising, in France provides an interesting case for comparison with the United States. Of note, France imposes substantial quantitative restrictions on advertising in television broadcast. For example, only one commercial spot per feature film is allowed, and certain common products, such as alcohol (including beer) or motion pictures, cannot be advertised on television. The ban on TV advertising also extends to store promotions. Therefore, this study may provide tentative evidence on the usefulness of quantitative restrictions on marketing communications in changing the public's attitude towards marketing.

We followed our standard sampling and screening procedure to draw a random sample of 500 articles published in top French publications available through the Factiva database. Half of the articles were published in 1997 and the other half in 2007. We were unable to examine marketing's image in France in 1987, because French-language records in Factiva do not extend to 1987. We obtained a sample of 444 observations for analysis after we screened out republished news, abstracts and instances where "marketing" is part of a company name. We show the split between general and business press articles and basic statistics in Panel B of Table 1. We used two doctoral

students whose mother tongue is French to do the content analysis following the same procedure as in our US study.

We plot the proportions of valenced references to marketing by the type of press in Panel B of Figure 1. Our French general-press results are largely consistent with the US findings and conclusions, with some notable differences. Over the past decade, the French public has held a markedly less favorable view of marketing and marketers than have the Americans. The 1997 and 2007 means of valenced references to marketing in the non-business sample are $-.89$ and $-.73$, respectively, which is more than twice the (negative) levels we observe in the US sample. The proportions of neutral mentions are two to three times smaller than in the US sample, 33.8% in 1997 and 20.9% in 2007, suggesting that the views of marketing are more polarized in France. Almost three quarters, or 73% , of valenced mentions in both 1997 and 2007 are negative and only 27% are positive. We encounter three or more distinctly negative references to marketing for each distinctly positive reference in the French general press, compared with a two to one ratio in the US general press.

The observed differences in marketing's popular image in the two countries are not necessarily due to marketers being more aggressive or devious in France. Unlike the Americans, the French are inherently less enthusiastic about the capitalist enterprise, free markets and conspicuous consumption (Landier and Thesmar 2008). It is hardly surprising then that the French have long frowned upon marketing as a quintessentially "capitalist" activity.

Yet, in spite of the substantial negativity, marketing's popular image in France has not changed over the past decade. The decrease in mean negative valence from 1997 to 2007 is not statistically significant, and most of the ratios of interest have remained stable over the same period. The popular image of marketing may have stabilized in France, because it has reached its negative potential, given the benign and legal nature of most marketing activities. Equally likely, though, the ever increasing regulation by the French government is having a mitigating impact on marketing's

negative image in France. For example, the French government recently moved to ban all advertising on the four national TV channels after 8:00 PM and phase it out completely by 2012.

In contrast with marketing's exposition in the French general-press, the French business press' current tone towards marketing is more favorable than in the USA. The 2007 mean valence score is .19 (not significantly different from zero), compared with .36 (significantly positive $p < .1$) in 1997. Approximately 58% of valenced mentions are positive and 42% are negative. These ratios have not changed since 1997. The proportion of distinctly positive references has also remained largely unchanged at 22%-24%, whereas the proportion of strongly negative references increased by ten percentage points to 22% in 2007. This change is not statistically significant. On balance, there appear to be faint signs that marketing's treatment in the French business press is becoming less favorable than before. However, the decline has not been nearly as pronounced as in the United States.

Discussion

Our results show that the US public is taking an increasingly dim view of marketing. While the replication in France does not indicate the same trend, the overall valence of the word "marketing" is markedly more negative there. Unfortunately, these results are not likely to surprise many in our discipline. Internal criticism of marketing's philosophy and practices has grown over the past fifteen years. For example, recognizing a decline in marketing's image, Sheth and Sisodia (2005, p. 12) point to a major flaw in the orientation of modern marketing departments that presses marketers to use misguided tactics for goal attainment: "Marketing's reputation cannot be redeemed unless it resolves the fundamental contradiction at its core: Marketing claims to be about representing the customer to the company, but it remains mostly about representing the company to the customer, using every trick in its bag to make customers behave in the company's best interests." In a scorching denunciation of marketing's current state of affairs, Johansson (2006, p. 37) declares American marketing morally bankrupt: "We marketers encourage unlimited spending, outrageous behavior, and the unmitigated pursuance of individual gratification. And we do this

because we have the marketing tools to do it, the companies have the financial muscle to do it, and the competition gives us a justification for doing it.”

The strongly critical views are not shared by everybody, though. Arguments in defence of marketing put forth both by academics and practitioners can be classified into three categories. First, some marketing advocates uphold the consumer sovereignty model that emphasizes customer supremacy in shaping product demand. They dispute that marketing can profoundly influence customers’ attitudes and behaviours – or downplay this influence. This camp argues that by itself, marketing does not have the power to shape consumer demand and to create needs; it can only uncover needs that were previously latent (Holbrook 1987; Kano 1984).

In a similar vein, others argue that customers are active participants in product-market creation to the extent that they invest effort in defining product functionality and usage and thus shape product-markets (Gautschi and Sabbavala 1995). Similarly, Godin (2005) provides an interesting perspective on why customers shoulder the blame for misinformation in marketing communications. He argues that consumers encourage marketers to lie to them, because marketing “stories” that are loosely consistent with the brand enhance the consumption experience.

The second line of defense of current marketing practices invokes anticipated competitive actions according to the “if we don’t do it, they will” logic. Marketing’s predicament has thus been compared to “the tragedy of the commons” (Hardin 1968; Sheth & Sisodia 2005; Shultz and Holbrook 2002).—Marketers promote harmful products, indiscriminately target market segments and employ questionable but effective tactics, because, if someone will do it at a great profit anyway, might as well be them.

The third line of defense rests on a realization that marketing is the most publicly visible part of the corporation. Marketing is the only organizational function charged with extracting revenues from customers. It makes promises to customers, and is naturally held responsible if these promises are overblown, or if the message is communicated in an aggressive and obtrusive way (Brown 2005). Behind the criticism of marketing may, therefore, lie a more fundamental critique, that of the

modern corporation and unintended consequences of capitalism. A recent empirical study by Brown (2005) provides initial evidence to that effect: two-thirds of surveyed consumers expressed a belief that most businesses would take advantage of the public if they felt that they would not be discovered. The problem, then, is not so much with marketing *per se*, but with the business enterprise in general. In fact, marketing may well constitute the scapegoat of modern capitalism. If true, this would be quite ironic, for marketing itself may have benefited from the use of advertising as a scapegoat in the 1970s and '80s (Pollay 1986).

Marketing may have contributed to its image degradation in at least two ways. First, marketing has consistently striven for prominence in the broadest range of social activities, such as social marketing, educational marketing, health marketing, celebrity marketing, cultural marketing, church marketing, place marketing, and others. This broadening movement has been celebrated as a sign of marketing's growing influence in society (Kotler 2005). It may have a downside, however, in that marketing's ubiquity may produce an all-encompassing, pervasive, and, subconsciously, frightening impression. Marketing's prominence also makes it the most obvious target for discontent.

Second, marketing has made exaggerated claims of its organizational role by largely "appropriating" the customer and the management system. For example, in their insightful account of marketing's role in modern society, Wilkie and Moore (1999) use the term "aggregate marketing system" to refer to what arguably could be described as "the modern corporation." In this expression, the term "marketing" could often be replaced by "management" with minimal loss of meaning.—By Wilkie and Moore's own count, only 30 of the 73 listed activities belonging to the "aggregate marketing system" are largely or entirely controlled by marketing, while 31 are largely controlled by other functions, with six remaining activities being only marginally related to marketing (p.203, Panel D). The ever-broadening definition of marketing may, at least partially, explain why much of marketing work is now done outside of marketing departments (Homburg, Workman and Krohmer 1999). In some respect, marketing may come to resemble the frog in a

Lafontaine fable. Unhappy with its size, the frog tried to swallow a lot of air in order to become as big as an ox... only to explode in the end.

The Future of Marketing

What will the future of marketing be if we uphold the prevailing marketing philosophy and practices? The current laissez-faire policy of self-regulation will likely lead to further discord in the profession and public resistance. At the same time, the results from the French sample tentatively show that more regulation is not guaranteed to prevent marketing from developing a tarnish image. By themselves, the three justifications discussed above cannot mitigate the increasingly negative public attitude towards marketing. The customer sovereignty position essentially blames the customer for marketing's transgressions, which is difficult to accept on substantive grounds. Blaming the competition to justify questionable practices only begs for a common action. Proposing that marketing is really a scapegoat and that the entire business system be transformed can be seen as an excuse to maintain the status quo.

Worse, failure to act will most likely result in marketing being caught in a vicious cycle. Consumers would further protect themselves against marketing abuse, both actively, for example, by adopting Tivo-like systems that allow one to skip commercial messages, and passively, by tuning off whenever they see a marketing message, even when this might be irrational (Darke and Ritchie 2007). This challenges marketers to find more ingenious and intrusive ways to get their messages across, which will likely further undermine marketing's public image.

After praising achievements that could be ascribed to marketing, such as raising the standard of living and creating jobs, Kotler acknowledges that we "[marketers] need to clean up some of our activities" (2006, p.159). Who will take charge of this clean-up? Can marketing professionals be entrusted to do the job? In order for self-restraint to be effective, marketers would have to abandon a narrow, short-term, view of marketing and to consider, instead, a longer-term perspective. This transformation would naturally drive the adoption of a multiple stakeholder approach (Lemon and Seiders 2006).

How could progress be made on both fronts? Some scholars advocate the development of marketing as a professional discipline with a code of ethics, a certification process and a set of conduct guidelines (Hunt 2007; Sheth and Sisodia 2005). A “Chief Customer Officer” would represent consumer interests within the firm and make sure that consumers are not abused by its marketers (Sheth and Sisodia 2005). These steps alone would make marketers more accountable for their actions.

Firms can further supplement these initiatives by reporting on their marketing practices in an extended corporate scorecard. The latter is being progressively adopted as a means to report on a firm’s social and environmental responsibilities.— Most leading firms in developed countries now routinely issue corporate social responsibility (CSR) reports (KPMG 2008, p. 14). An evaluation of marketing practices could become a mandatory section of the CSR report, or, perhaps, a separate report. The inclusion of a marketing audit in the CSR report may allow good corporate citizens to differentiate themselves, while enabling activists to more easily target the laggards.

While these reforms would improve the practice and perception of marketing in the long run, the implementation mechanism is not entirely clear. Referring back to our analogy: Who will watch after the proper use of the Commons? The most likely outcome of this reform thrust, therefore, would be business as usual... until “somebody changes something.” For this reason, we treat the discussion of marketing reform as a mandate to search elsewhere, lest marketing should decline the same way the Commons did.

We subscribe to the view that marketing is fundamentally benign. Yet, its powerful tools can be used either to raise living standards and create jobs or to corrupt and promote socially harmful behavior. To think of the future of this force, we find it useful to consider a mix of three marketing practices that we call “ego-marketing,” “techno-marketing,” and “alter-marketing.” Marketing’s future depends on the growth and strength of each practice within this mix.

Ego-marketing describes the dominant marketing practice of the day, according to which marketing is fundamentally an agent of the seller (Achrol and Kotler 1999, p.159). Its goal is to

encourage and stimulate consumption in all its forms. “Ego” refers to the fact that marketing is firm-centered. Instead of providing the firm with a balanced view of the market, ego-marketing adheres to an “inside-out” view, which seeks to maximize profit from the current product line (Sheth and Sisodia 2005). The definition of marketing that, until recently, was used by a leading business school on its marketing department’s Web site provides an unfortunate example of ego-marketing: “Marketing teaches how to manage perceptions to run a profitable as well as ethical business.” It is debatable how managing perceptions can enable marketers to run an ethical business. We fear that the last part of this definition was added in an *ad-hoc* manner, so as to soften the profit argument. The term “ego” additionally reflects that many marketing messages appeal to consumers’ baser instincts: ego, envy, selfishness and exhibitionism. The ubiquity of conspicuous consumption (Veblen 1899) trading-up mentality (Silverstein and Fiske 2003), and the success of luxury strategies (Kapferer and Bastien 2008) underscore the prominence of ego-marketing.

Techno-marketing refers to the increasing use of information and communication technology (ICT) in marketing. Information and Communication Technology has the potential to transform the current marketing practices. In particular, virtually costless information storage and access are shifting the balance of power between firms and consumers. Firms now routinely possess better quality (factual) information about their customers’ behavior than do the customers themselves, because they are hampered by faulty memory and biased perceptions. As a result, firms are increasingly able to predict customer preferences and make valuable recommendations. In some industries, such as credit cards or mobile communications, a firm’s customers rely on their providers to monitor and advise them on their consumption patterns.

It is widely believed that ICT will enable firms to target individual consumers (Day and Montgomery 1999; Pine and Gilmore 1999). Some firms, such as Netflix, Amazon and many new car dealerships, already practice one-to-one marketing to a considerable extent. If one subscribes to the idea that marketing emerged as an information function born out of the historical separation of

production and consumption (McInnes 1964), further development of techno-marketing may endanger marketing's very existence (Holbrook and Hulbert 2002).

The third practice, *alter-marketing*, refers to the view that marketing can become an agent of the buyer (Achrol and Kotler 1999) and a force for positive change. Specifically, the development of alter-marketing calls for drastically expanding the use of marketing in support of socially-beneficial business practices, such as sustainable business, the development of health- and eco-friendly consumer habits and the promotion of social businesses to help alleviate poverty (Yunus 2008).⁸

The present demographic, environmental and economic trends favor the practice of alter-marketing. A number of serious health problems, such as diabetes and excess weight, are reaching pandemic proportions, and governments are proposing a combination of economic and marketing measures to improve public health. On the economic front, the world is beginning to realize that current consumption patterns are not sustainable, and that technological progress alone will not provide a solution.—The world's population is continuing to grow, whereas energy sources and food supplies are dwindling, productivity improvements notwithstanding (e.g., Brown 2008; Friedman 2008). Meanwhile, the environment is also deteriorating, with the rise in CO² levels creating conditions for wide-spread turmoil in the not so distant future (Brown 2008; Worldwatch Institute 2009).

⁸ The idea of marketing as a positive force has its origins in the concept of social marketing (Kotler and Zaltman 1971; Kotler 1972). Unfortunately, the practice of social marketing has been limited. Its most notable applications have been to promote health-related issues, such as campaigns to use sun-screen or to curb the consumption of harmful products. Social marketing has not been applied to address "upstream" issues, such as the circumstances surrounding the marketing of harmful products (Goldberg 1995; Andreasen 2006). Moreover, several important initiatives do not fall naturally within the social marketing paradigm. One such initiative is Quality-of-Life (QOL) marketing, defined as "marketing practice... designed to *enhance* customer well-being while *preserving* the well-being of the firm's other stakeholders (Lee and Sirgy 2004, p. 45, emphasis in original). QOL marketing takes a broader approach than social marketing. It looks at both marketing beneficence and non-maleficence, and seeks to include all stakeholders in its analysis. Another important initiative is the Transformative Consumer Research (TCR) movement. TCR emerged from a realization that extant marketing research has overwhelmingly taken the viewpoint of the firm rather than balancing it with the consumer perspective (Bazerman 2001; Mick 2005). It seeks to "make a beneficial difference in the lives of consumers, both present and future generations..." (Mick 2005, p. 1). TCR's micro-orientation differs markedly from social marketing's predominant social welfare perspective. We view alter-marketing as a broad-based alternative to ego-marketing that encompasses social marketing, QOL, TCR and related paradigms.

Undoubtedly, some of the needed change in consumption patterns will arise from economic necessity imposed by free markets (e.g., raising fuel prices will help improve driving habits). Other changes will be imposed through stricter legislation to curb consumption. School education may drive yet another aspect of the desired behavioral change (Ahlberg and Filho 1998). We propose that alter marketing can become a key ingredient in a broad-based effort to overcome these global challenges.

To that effect, the alter-marketing practice calls for a systematic deployment of campaigns promoting needed behavioral changes in the population. For example, alter marketing can be used to bridge the well-documented gap between people's socially and environmentally responsible attitudes and actual behaviors (Carrigan and Attalla 2001; Chatzidakis, Hibbert and Smith 2006). Case in point is a recent marketing campaign that successfully reduced water usage in Jerusalem by 6%, which corresponds to a hypothesised effect of a 35% price increase (Grinstein and Nisan 2009). Alter-marketing also calls for the development of a new generation of products and services that will expand the efficiency frontier in energy usage and emissions.

Furthermore, just as sailors use the force of the wind to sail against the wind, alter-marketers would employ marketing tools to fight marketing abuses. We find a useful parallel in how this may unfold in the instances where ego-marketers successfully transformed anti-consumerism campaigns into marketing opportunities (Miles 1998). For example, apparel makers introduced T-shirts sporting the "No logo" message inspired by the famous anti-branding exposé by Naomi Klein (Klein 2000). Alter-marketing forces might proceed with the same logic, but only in the reverse direction: combining alter and techno marketing forces against ego marketing. The first step, consumer resistance, has already been documented (e.g., Dobscha 1998; Close and Zinkhan 2007). Next, organized consumers may adopt new marketing approaches to recognize forward-looking firms and to expose firms that abuse their marketing power.

The Marketing-practice Mix of the Future

We believe that the future of marketing will involve a mix of ego-marketing, techno-marketing and alter-marketing. In particular, it pivots on the evolution of the techno-marketing practice. There is little uncertainty about the fact that techno-marketing will continue to expand, as new technologies are developed and adopted continuously (Shugan 2004). What is unknown is whether it is ego- or alter-marketing forces who will find the most effective way to use techno-marketing in pursuit of their objectives. We envision two possible scenarios that are predicated on what the dominant combination in the marketing-practice mix will be.

Scenario A – A combination of ego- and techno-marketing dominates: the downward spiral continues

Under this scenario, ego-marketing practitioners will seek to use information technologies to enable effective one-to-one marketing that can produce difficult-to-refuse consumer offers. Although this appears to be a win-win development, consumers will likely find these technologies a double-edged sword. On one hand, the use of profiling techniques and the targeting of smaller and smaller segments will greatly improve ego-marketing efficiency, and may reduce the amount of solicitations that an individual consumer may receive. On the other hand, the pressure on targeted consumers is likely to increase. For example, the development of mobile commerce and GPS tracking will make it possible to make unsolicited individual-, time- and space-dependent offers. Firms will likely use their knowledge of each consumer's social network to make compelling appeals to one's motives of social status achievement, self-gratification and envy in efforts to increase the desirability of their products and services. These developments are likely to face privacy and ethical challenges. On balance, marketing would evolve as a coldly effective, efficient, and... mercenary activity that consumers fear and resent.

Scenario B – A combination of alter- and techno-marketing dominates: marketing becomes part of the solution

The development of online media delineates a shift from the classical one-way communication and marketing paradigm to multi-way interaction. This evolution presents a unique opportunity for the growth of the alter-marketing practice. In particular, ICT can help to rebalance power between firms and consumers by providing consumers with effective tools for communication and organization (Urban 2005). The traditionally isolated consumer thus becomes a connected one, and his or her views and experiences can now influence many others when shared through online media. A connected consumer is also better able to influence the firm and to participate in product offerings (co)creation. Examples of consumer activism spawned by ICT include the emergence of complaint Web sites as an outlet for consumer grievances and a platform for common action, and the development of new solutions through a user effort, as is the case with open-source software products (Ward and Ostrom 2006).

With firms no longer being in a position of great strength vis-à-vis consumers, the ensuing dialog should enable firms to pay more attention to consumers' genuine interest. As Schultz and Holbrook (1999, p. 224) point out, the injection of communication technology into what they call "marketing acumen" represents one of the most powerful solutions to the Commons dilemma.

The Role of Marketing Scholars

Which scenario will come to pass is open to debate at this stage. *A priori*, firms have an edge in new technology appropriation and deployment. However, not-for-profit organizations also display considerable agility and innovativeness in using ICT. Irrespective of what unfolds in the field, marketing scholars have an important role to play in promoting alter-marketing. We are at a crossroads both as a society and profession. As stated eloquently by Mick (2007, p. 292), "we need soon to revise and elevate the ends of marketing. Otherwise we will face not only the demise of marketing as a field we could be so much prouder of, but also the end of ourselves and our fragile planet." This concerns both our research and teaching activities. As researchers, we should

document how a combination of alter-marketing and techno-marketing practices is impacting consumer behaviors and attitudes. As educators, we should consider revising our marketing curricula so as to end the dominance of ego-marketing. We should allocate some time to classroom discussion of alter-marketing as a necessary counter-weight to ego-marketing.

Hunt (2007, p. 279) reminds us of the early days of our discipline when one of the leading marketing scholars of the day L. D. H. Weld was called before a special committee of Minnesota legislature to explain why he taught such a “dangerous doctrine.” Since then, marketing has emerged as a mainstream business activity. However, it has not kept up with the times. There is compelling evidence that the public image of our “dangerous doctrine” has lost its positive luster, and the very word “marketing” is acquiring a negative connotation. As marketers, it is our responsibility to make it a word we can be proud of again.

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TABLE 1

Frequencies and percentages (in parentheses) of references to marketing observed in the general press, business press and blogs.

Panel A: USA

Sample	Year	Valence Rating							Mean ^a	SE Mean	# Obs.
		-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3			
General press	1987	1 (.1)	11 (1.5)	76 (10.5)	558 (76.8)	67 (9.2)	13 (1.8)	1 (.1)	-.03	.10	727
	1997	3 (.4)	30 (3.8)	121 (15.4)	511 (65.2)	99 (12.6)	18 (2.3)	2 (.3)	-.18	.08	784
	2007	10 (1.2)	44 (5.2)	148 (17.6)	521 (62.1)	92 (11)	21 (2.5)	3 (.4)	-.39	.08	839
Business press	1987	-	-	9 (2.7)	277 (83.4)	42 (12.7)	4 (1.2)	-	.75	.11	332
	1997	-	8 (3.5)	16 (7)	177 (77.6)	25 (11)	2 (.9)	-	-.06	.18	228
	2007	-	10 (3.6)	35 (12.4)	205 (72.7)	30 (10.6)	2 (.7)	-	-.27	.14	282
Blogs	2007	24 (2.9)	52 (6.2)	185 (22)	443 (52.6)	93 (11)	32 (3.8)	13 (1.4)	-.41	.07	842

Panel B: France

General press	1997	6 (8.5)	14 (19.7)	14 (19.7)	24 (33.8)	9 (12.7)	3 (4.2)	1 (1.4)	-.89	.23	71
	2007	2 (1.7)	34 (29.6)	30 (26.1)	24 (20.9)	14 (12.2)	9 (7.8)	2 (1.7)	-.73	.16	115
Business press	1997	-	7 (4.7)	16 (10.7)	92 (61.7)	20 (13.4)	12 (8.1)	2 (1.3)	.35	.20	149
	2007	1 (.9)	7 (6.4)	7 (6.4)	73 (67)	13 (11.9)	6 (5.5)	2 (1.8)	.19	.28	109

^a The computation of the mean excludes neutral observations.

TABLE 2

Words most commonly used in the first modifier and head noun position—US sample (relative frequencies are in parentheses.^a)

Panel A: First modifiers

Sample/year	-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3
General							
1987	-	manipulative (2/9)	aggressive (3/17)	direct (8/181)	aggressive (3/32)	sophisticated (3/7)	-
1997	-	aggressive/ clever (2/20)	aggressive (4/46)	direct (6/177)	good (4/54)	clever (2/14)	-
2007	-	aggressive (2/23)	viral (4/70)	direct (5/157)	clever/good/ wise (2/50)	great (4/15)	-
Business							
1987	-	-	-	direct (8/114)	major (2/26)	-	-
1997	-	-	-	direct (4/73)	new (2/16)	-	-
2007	-	-	aggressive/ off-label (2/16)	email (4/79)	-	-	-
Blogs	-	aggressive/ misleading (2/23)	viral (6/79)	viral (12/140)	viral (7/39)	brilliant/ great (2/15)	great (5/12)

Panel B: Head nouns

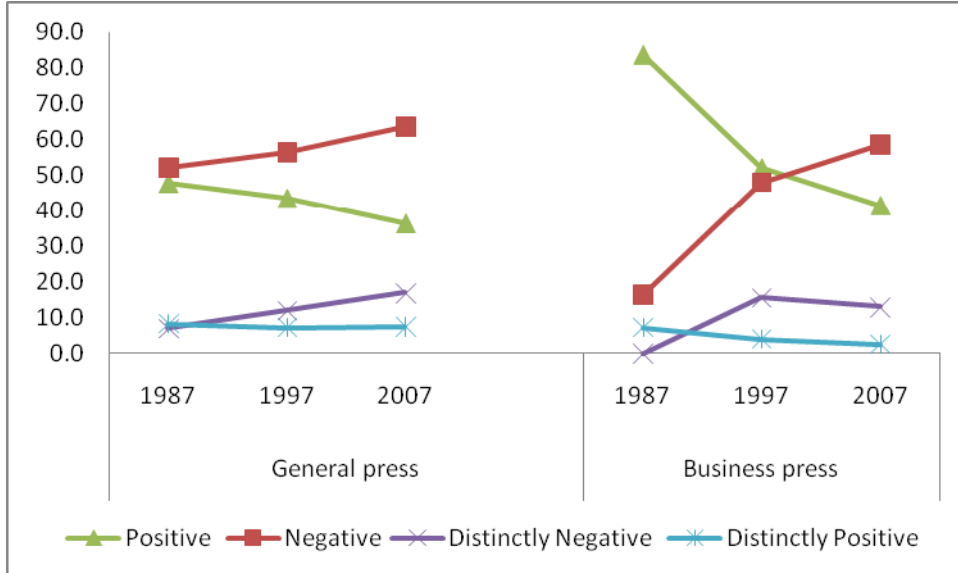
Sample/year	-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3
General							
1987	-	-	ploy (5/48)	company (16/356)	strategy (7/54)	techniques (2/10)	-
1997	-	department (3/24)	ploy (9/85)	plan (12/280)	campaign (5/61)	genius/tool (2/11)	-
2007	campaign (2/7)	campaign (4/32)	campaign/tool/ practices (7/102)	plan (29/326)	move/tool (5/61)	campaign (4/21)	-
Business							
1987	-	-	campaign (2/7)	company (18/205)	expertise/endeavor/ effort/strategy (3/33)	-	-
1997	-	-	practices/ programs (2/15)	effort (8/116)	campaign, ideas, strategy (2/18)	-	-
2007	-	-	campaign/ practices (2/20)	cost/firm (9/136)	campaign/ talent (2/17)	-	-
Blogs	-	ploy (4/35)	campaign/ ploy (6/106)	campaign (20/244)	campaign (6/47)	team (3/25)	campaign (4/10)

^a The denominator excludes “marketing” that is present in each bracket as a first modifier, second modifier or head noun.

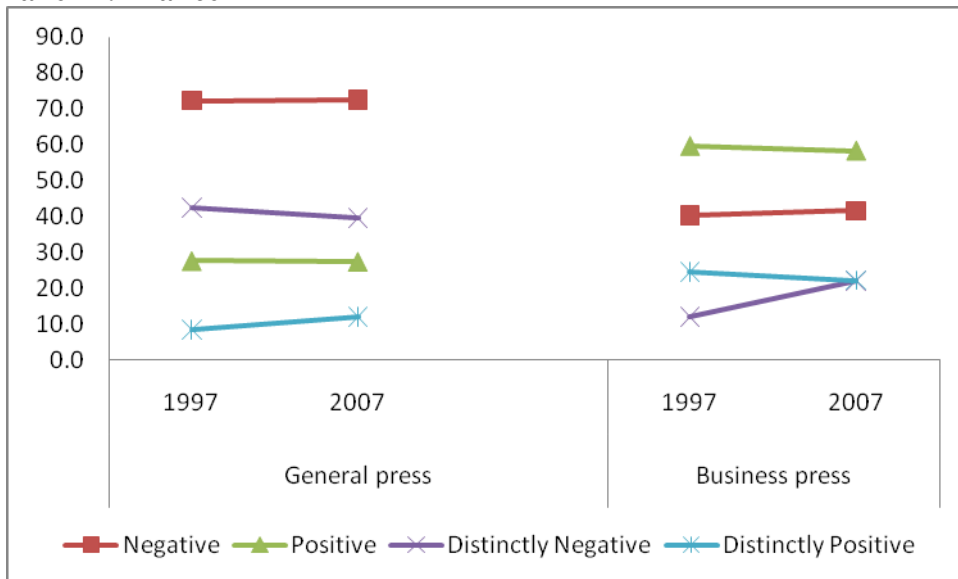
FIGURE 1

Percentages of positive, negative, distinctly positive (+2 or +3) and distinctly negative (-2 or -3) references to marketing (neutral mentions were excluded from the computation).

Panel A: USA



Panel B: France



Appendix A

Examples of Rated Instances of “Marketing”

+3-strongly positive: “Thomas Cook’s “Extra Day” campaign is [marketing (1st modifier) genius (head-noun)] and the kind of campaign I would have loved to be involved in. There is immediate viewer appeal because everyone can relate to the message and it’s really commercial. Who hasn’t wished for just one more day while on holiday?”

+2-positive: “Farmers must be much more [skillful (1st modifier) in marketing (head noun)] than in the past, Swanson said. “Before, (profit) margins were greater and they could get by with a simple control program. Agriculture has become much more complex and won’t allow that any more,” he said.”

+1-somewhat positive: “Detroit Pistons guard Vinnie Johnson is conducting what he hopes will be a [successful (1st modifier) marketing (2nd modifier) campaign (head noun)]. He is showcasing his talents, because at the end of this season he becomes a free agent.”

0-neutral: “A Lockheed spokesman said that while “we still feel that the Hercules is a good platform” for such an aircraft, “we’re going to have to sit back and reevaluate our [international (1st modifier) marketing (2nd modifier) effort (head noun)].”

-1-somewhat negative: “Egly-Ouriet, H. Billiot Fils and other dedicated vigneron produce limited quantities of fabulous fizz. Never heard of them? Good. Snobbery’s about taste, Champagne taste. Maybe even a beer pocketbook. It’s not about falling for [marketing (1st modifier) magic (head noun)].”

-2-negative: “De Marsche's record as president and chief executive officer was a mixed one. He championed and oversaw the arts center's successful expansion and assembled a first-rate staff, including two experienced curators with ties to the Denver Art Museum. At the same time, he put together a string of high-profile exhibitions that significantly boosted attendance and membership but also damaged the museum's credibility by putting more emphasis on glitz and [marketing (head noun)] than substance.”

-3-strongly negative: “And then they ask you to click on a link in the e-mail and participate in a survey. And then, just in case you’re not amused/annoyed yet, the comedy team in [their (1st modifier) marketing (2nd modifier) department (head noun)] points out that should you receive e-mails from them in the future, you can visit their site and sign up.”