Sidney Levy: Challenging the Philosophical Assumptions of Marketing

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Sidney Levy has been one of the main contributors to marketing and consumer behavior in the twentieth century and is a living legend among marketers today. This historical essay will look at how Levy was able to have a substantial impact on the field of marketing by pushing it in new directions. He saw well before others the value of doing research on brand image, symbolism, and cultural meaning in marketing and of broadening the marketing concept. Levy was able to achieve these insights by questioning the prevailing assumptions of the day, by taking an interdisciplinary perspective to solve what he saw as marketing problems, and by encouraging philosophical pluralism.

Keywords: *marketing history; philosophical pluralism; Sidney Levy; brand image; cultural meaning symbols; marketing concept; market orientation*

> I claim to be only an eclectic social scientist wandering around in search of insights, whether they come from watching people, living with them, reading about them, talking to them, interviewing them, measuring them, dreaming about them, photographing them, learning their dreams and their stories, and constructing fantasies about them that I think correspond for the while to versions of their realities, always using and testing against that dear old nomological network that says what reality is.
>
> Sidney Levy (1996, 175)

This passage from Sidney Levy's 1996 *Journal of Consumer Research* article, "Stalking the Amphisbaena," says a lot about the thought processes of one of the principal contributors to the field of modern marketing. Throughout his career, Levy advocated using various approaches to construct the consumer's reality. This is remarkable because he started his career when marketing drew primarily from economics and was concerned with the efficient distribution of goods and the definition of marketing functions. Levy offered the field philosophical pluralism, which led to foundational work in the areas of brand image, symbolism, and market orientation.

Philosophical pluralism is the belief that no single explanatory system or view of reality can account for all the phenomena in life (Peter and Olson 1983; Arndt 1985; Anderson 1986; Gummesson 2005). Levy believed that there are many ways of observing, understanding, and explaining reality and that what is important are the underlying assumptions about reality and the implications that flow from these assumptions (Levy 1999). This unique philosophical perspective enabled Levy to foresee the importance of symbols and cultural meaning in marketing. Accordingly, a primary purpose of this historical essay is to use Levy's body of research to show the value of philosophical pluralism.

This article examines Levy's ideas historically. Compared to a literature review, which assumes a static social and cultural environment, intellectual history adds perspective and proportion by investigating the human factor in marketing thought (Fullerton and Punj 2004). Ideas do not emerge in a vacuum. Marketing concepts are developed by people and reflect their personalities and experiences. Studying innovators such as Levy helps us understand how and why ideas emerge (Jones 1998, 2004). One of the responsibilities of academics is to place their field of study into a proper perspective (Wilkie and Moore 1999). Thus, the value of historical research is that it looks beyond the surface of facts and identifies common threads of thought (Jones and Monieson 1990).

This article begins with a look at Levy's background, followed by a brief review of the state of marketing theory at the start of his academic career. Next will be a discussion of how, by challenging the prevailing philosophical assumptions of marketing, Levy enhanced the field's understanding of brand image, symbols and marketing, and the broader application of marketing. The final sections will consider Levy's intellectual

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FIGURE 1 SIDNEY J. LEVY CIRCA LATE 1960s
SOURCE: Used with permission from Sidney Levy.

legacy and how the research process today may not allow for the kind of philosophical pluralism that enabled him to advance the field.

LEVY'S BACKGROUND

Sidney J. Levy (See Figure 1) was born May 29, 1921, in St. Louis, but was raised in Chicago. He first developed an interest in marketing when he was nine years old and working in his father's produce store. Even then, he thought there had to be something more to commodities than just their physical attributes. Too poor for higher education after high school, he worked as a messenger boy until serving in what was then the Army Air Force. That service entitled Levy to the G.I. Bill, which enabled him to attend the University of Chicago, where he earned a Bachelor of Philosophy in 1946 and an MA in Psychology in 1948. At Chicago, he debated endlessly with his classmates the great issues and complexities of personal freedom and social control. His liberal arts education led him to become a licensed psychologist in the state of Illinois. In 1948, he became a principal in Social Research Inc. (SRI), and in 1956, he earned his PhD from the Committee on Human Development, University of Chicago. His work at SRI involved numerous studies of how consumers perceive products and brands. He also became interested in the role of social class in consumer behavior and taught his clients about social stratification and the structure of American society (Levy 2003). Levy and his colleagues at SRI used qualitative methods in research for the Coca-Cola company on why people drink soft drinks, for AT&T on the meaning of the telephone, and for the Wrigley company on what baseball meant to Cubs fans. These diverse projects provided the foundation for his insights into the symbolic nature of marketing. One of his articles from this period was "Symbols for Sale" (Levy 1959a), which in May 2000 received the Paul D. Converse Award in recognition of its original, insightful, and timeless contribution to the discipline of marketing. He joined the faculty of the Northwestern University School of Business in 1961 and stayed for thirty-six years.

Levy submitted his first professional article to the *Journal of Educational Psychology* in 1947, and as of this writing, was last published in *Journal of Business Research* in 2005 with the article "The Evolution of Qualitative Research in Consumer Behavior." Initially intrigued by the study of personality/lifestyle and projective techniques, he has for sixty years maintained an interdisciplinary approach to marketing (Levy 2002). Levy pushed a literally minded field and helped expand its knowledge by challenging the common assumptions of marketing and by introducing noneconomic variables into its research paradigm. He used methods that investigate the interaction of multiple forces and permit us to find out what consumers' lives are like (Levy 2005).

MARKETING THOUGHT IN THE 1940s AND 1950s

Levy's contributions to marketing and consumer behavior can be truly appreciated by considering the state of marketing thought when he started his career. Marketing in the 1940s and 1950s was highly descriptive and preoccupied with establishing its domain and functions (Fullbrook 1940). The overarching characteristic of the marketing field was its reliance on economics, which provided the philosophical assumptions of rational choice, functional utility of products, objectivity of the researcher, a single reality, and separable and independent marketing elements. The primary focus was on the activities of the firm.

The assumption of rational choice had several far-reaching implications for the field of marketing. The consumer was

seen as a utility-optimizing individual who would consciously weigh the costs and benefits of a purchase. This view encouraged classification schemes such as the famous distinction between convenience, shopping, and specialty goods because it was believed that the physical attributes of products drove purchase decisions (Gardner 1945; Holton 1958; Miracle 1965). Quality, price, and durability were deemed the most important attributes.

Along with these economic assumptions, researchers stressed business transactions. The role of marketing was to stimulate and service demand (Lewis and Erickson 1969). For example, the 1935 American Marketing Association definition of marketing was the "performance of business activities that direct the flow of goods and services from producers to consumers" (Keefe 2004, 17). Marketing textbooks of the era focused primarily on pricing practices, costs of distribution, and the economics of advertising (Wilkie and Moore 2003). The marketing activities these texts considered were restricted to commercial activities. No mention was made of using marketing for nonbusiness purposes.

Emphasizing distribution, authors tried to classify marketing functions (Ryan 1935). Believed to be separable and independent of each other, these functions entailed the various tasks undertaken by channel members (Bucklin 1965). Researchers believed more efficient distribution systems could be created. Marketing's role was to deliver the right products at the right time and place (Fullbrook 1940; Bucklin 1965; Alderson 1965). Buyers were viewed as customers who cared only about concrete value, not as consumers with more diverse motives. Buyers purchased products based on their physical attributes and capability to maximize utility. Their choices were rational, and other aspects of the consumption process were of secondary importance. These economic assumptions were not readily challenged. As Levy (1978, 43–44) put it:

> One of the traditionally unfortunate deficiencies of formal marketing lies in its reluctance to deal with the less tangible realms of explanations of human behavior. Given to a narrow sense of realism, practicality and the tenacious grip of the economic mind, marketers tend to resist areas of understanding that have to do with symbols, myths, legends, arbitrary belief, and fantasy.

Levy took the definition of goods into a new realm and questioned the supposed functional orientation of consumers (Levy 1959a, 1959b). Although marketing is about satisfying needs and wants, the exchange process entails more than just necessity (Levy 1987). For Levy, marketing was not only about the efficient distribution of economic goods. Goods also have cultural meaning, and market researchers should not look at consumers as a mere economic component in the marketing process.

CHALLENGING PHILOSOPHICAL ASSUMPTIONS

Functional Utility of Products and Rationality of Consumers

At the start of Levy's career, marketing viewed the consumer as a rational, utility-optimizing individual. The purpose of business was to create superior quality while pricing competitively. Levy (1963) believed this led toward narrowly conceived, static, and ultimately unrealistic portrayals of products and human behavior. Understanding consumers had less to do with the question "Do I need this?" and more to do with the questions "Do I want it or do I like it?" Products such as soap, shampoo, and hair dryers are not merely aids to meet functional needs but afford complex ways of expressing one's self and self-concept (Levy 1981a). Levy sought to demonstrate that purchases were made on grounds that his colleagues thought were insubstantial (Levy 1959b). He questioned the prevailing economic wisdom of the time. "The ideal market is like a Heaven—perfect but dull; the real one is the human one on Earth, fraught with emotion, striving, and the symbolic investments that make us care about what and how we market to and from others" (Levy 1974, 246).

In 1955, Gardner and Levy introduced the idea of brand image in "The Product and the Brand," which first appeared in the *Harvard Business Review*. Before this article, it was believed that consumers would fret about minute quality differences presumed to provide the greatest utility. Products were conceptualized as bundles of features with obvious benefits. Gardner and Levy questioned these assumptions and theorized that products had complex associations, characteristics, and personalities more important for the overall status and sales of the brand than many of their technical attributes (Gardner and Levy 1955). This symbolic image incorporated consumer motivations, feelings, logic, and attitudes. Consumers have a contextual and integrated perception of products and brands and their relationships with them (Levy 2006). Consumers buy a brand for the meanings it has, not just for its physical attributes. Although not stated explicitly, the implication was that managers could use brand image to position a product. Another contribution of this article was its call to integrate all marketing-mix efforts in support of "long-term investment in the reputation of the brand" because a brand's reputation cannot be all things to all people and is not that malleable (Gardner and Levy 1955, 39).

Since Levy questioned the economic assumption of conceptualizing products purely as bundles of utility with obvious benefits that can be rationalized, a new definition of products was needed, one with a greater recognition of their social and psychological meanings. His goal was not only to understand how products satisfy certain practical needs but also how they fit meaningfully into culture and how consumers use them (Levy 1959b).

Symbols and Marketing

According to Levy, his interest in symbols was inspired in childhood by reading folk and fairy tales, and later, the works of James Frazer, Alfred Korzybski, S. I. Hayakawa, George Herbert Mead, William Lloyd Warner, Sigmund Freud, and Carl Jung. His own psychoanalysis also influenced his thinking (Levy 2003). Levy's initial work on brands led him to consider the larger implications of symbols in marketing and the complexity of motives and issues beyond economics. Symbols are an inherent and natural part of human expression (Levy 1960). Levy (1959a, 1959b) worked from the premise that consumers are not as functionally driven as they used to be, if they ever really were. To him, the exchange process and product ownership and use are about acquiring symbols, which generate meaning for the consumer. Products help define consumers' self-concept, and consumers make product choices based on how they want to express and project themselves both to themselves and to others.

> Marketing is then a process of providing customers with parts of a potential mosaic from which they, as artists of their own lifestyles, can pick and choose to develop the composition that for the time may seem the best. (Levy 1963, 224)

> Marketing is not only an impersonal economic activity, but in addition to its conventional considerations about exchanges, buying and selling values, income, budget, outlets, and transportation, it is inevitably interwoven with other personal, noneconomic relationships in society. (Levy 1974, 246)

For Levy, the focus should be on meanings that are exchanged in a transaction and not just the functional utility in which consumers rationally weigh the costs and benefits. Once again, he questioned the economics-based assumptions about consumers and products. The symbolic nature of marketing is in how consumers use products and brands to tell symbolic stories about their lives and their aims (Gardner and Levy 1955; Levy 1959a, 1960, 1963).

In a later article, "Meaning in Advertising Stimuli," Levy (1986) refined his ideas through a discussion of the symbolic meanings of beverages. Once more, he questioned the reliance of marketing on an economic philosophy. For Levy, product perceptions were patterns of meanings resulting from consumption effects, preparation processes, and product color, quantity, and variety. Basically, when consumers are young, they want a beverage that is nutritious, sweet, and light in color; when they are mature, they want freedom, so they use something intoxicating, with strong taste and dark color. Boundaries within products and brands are managed by using symbolic vocabulary (Levy 1986). Thus, to move milk up the hierarchy of meaning and make it seem more grown-up, chocolate could be added to make it dark, and thus, more mature. For Levy, the purpose of advertising was to symbolize the status and aspirations of human identities and not the functional benefits of products. The varieties of symbolic attributes inherent in common beverages were mind boggling.

In his *Journal of Marketing* article "Interpreting Consumer Mythology: A Structural Approach to Consumer Behavior," Levy (1981b) used Levi Strauss's theory of myths to demonstrate the existence of a meta-language of symbolism for food through the categories of age, sex, social status, and eating at home versus eating out. Little myths show how the basic vocabulary of cooking and eating is used to express the identities of males and females, the young and the mature, and consumers in low, middle, and high status positions. The marketing manager works within this structural system and can use the symbolic vocabulary to define and position the product.

In "Symbols for Sale" (Levy 1959) and "Marketing and Aesthetics" (Levy and Czepiel 1974), Levy gave some credence both to symbolic and to functional attributes. Symbolism in a brand's image added to its functional dimension. In later work, he stressed the symbolic over the functional. Myths were explainable in terms of their structures of meanings, a view of the world in terms of what was signified (Firat and Venkatesh 1995). Levy was more interested in discovering the structure and vocabulary of symbolic codes and treated meanings as automatic and unproblematic. He did not engage in a substantive discussion of the meaning-transfer process or a cultural critique of the symbols, myths, and meanings.

One might differ with Levy's structural approach to cultural symbols, but no one can argue about the impact of his ideas. At a time when marketing thought was primarily concerned with defining its activities and making distribution more efficient, Levy saw consumers as noneconomic, socially goal oriented, and living out their destinies—that is, their lifetimes of consuming—with the potential for infinite variety (Levy 1991). Objects have meanings for consumers who engage in exchanges and make choices based on these meanings. By breaking with the assumption of economic rationality in consumers and the functional utility of products, Levy saw the phenomena of brand image and symbols before others did. This has helped facilitate a paradigm shift toward the symbolic and cultural meaning of marketing.

The Commercial Focus of Marketing

Levy also questioned the idea that marketing is primarily a narrowly defined business activity and that marketing functions are separate and independent from society. With his Northwestern colleague, Philip Kotler, he expanded the concept of marketing into a social activity in which marketers could apply their thinking and skills to a broader range of social activities (Kotler and Levy 1969a). Today, it seems obvious that marketing is everywhere. Managers in many types of organizations face the same strategic concerns about consumers, product positioning, competition, and the marketing environment. Marketing can be applied not just to packaged goods but to nonprofit, art, entertainment, health care, and religious organizations as well as to the professions and to political campaigns.

> The choice facing those who manage non-business organizations is not whether to market or not market, for no organization can avoid marketing. The choice is whether to do it well or poorly, and on this necessity the case for organizational marketing is basically founded. (Kotler and Levy 1969a)

This broadening of marketing did not go unchallenged. Scholars such as David Luck (1969) believed that the domain of marketing should stay in the realm of economic transactions. Luck believed that making the marketing system work efficiently provided enough important research opportunities, and thus, there was no reason to take marketing beyond its economic scope.

> A manageable, intelligible and logical definition of marketing can be fashioned when its scope is bounded within those processes or activities whose ultimate result is a market transaction. Marketing is concerned with markets, of course, and markets must be characterized by buying-and-selling. (Luck 1969, 54)

Kotler and Levy's (1969b) response to Luck's argument was to redefine the nature of exchange by including ideas of continuing relationships and value, thus making marketing an all-encompassing phenomenon. This position further undermined economic assumptions and gave rise to the social exchange theory of marketing (Bagozzi 1975).

> The crux of marketing lies in the general idea of exchange rather than the narrower idea of market transactions. . . . Marketing is a universal process carried on by individuals, groups, and organizations. Basically, it describes those efforts to win the support of others through offering value. (Kotler and Levy 1969b, 57)

Kotler and Levy (1971) took this argument still further in their *Harvard Business Review* article, "Demarketing, Yes Demarketing," in which they contended that the marketer's task was more complex than just engineering an increase in sales. Firms might choose to demarket if there were a temporary shortage of something, if a product were being discontinued, or even if chronic overpopularity threatened a brand's exclusivity and quality image. For Levy and Kotler, marketing was more than just sales and economic transactions; it was about managing customer expectations and relationships in a larger social system.

In reviewing Levy's career, it is clear that he practiced what he preached with regard to the concept of marketing: he applied his ideas about brand image and symbolism to many new areas including government marketing, public interests such as smoking, health, and social welfare, legal issues, developing nations, the arts, and even cutting trees. Human nature and the experiences of everyday life interested him, and since marketing is everywhere, it fit him perfectly.

LEVY'S INTELLECTUAL LEGACY

By challenging economic assumptions about consumer behavior and by taking a pluralistic, interdisciplinary approach to solving problems, Levy was able to push marketing in new directions. Levy's work on brand image, the symbolic nature of consumption, and the marketing concept continues to influence the field today.

Brand Image

Levy believed consumers bought to satisfy wants and likes and associated products with specific meanings. Levy (2003, 102) suggested the "brand exists in people's minds as a symbolic entity, an integrated resultant of all their experiences with it in the marketplace." Although these ideas broke new ground in the 1950s, they are now commonplace. His ideas have led to the existing rich and diverse literature on branding and cultural meaning: for example, on how to manage image through brand equity (Aaker 1991; Keller 1993) and brand personality (Aaker 1997). More recently, Doug Holt (2004) has written about iconic brands such as Nike, Apple, and Harley-Davidson, which create and tie into cultural myths that allow people to consume the myth and the image.

Cultural Meaning

Levy (1974) recognized and foretold the importance of a cultural critique in marketing with his essay "Myth and Meaning in Marketing" (Levy 1974), which describes the value of anthropological concepts and methods for marketing research. The emphasis on symbolic cultural objects and processes, according to Levy, would allow anthropology to provide rich insights into consumer experiences, particularly in less tangible realms. The study of cultural meaning is really an extension of the study of the symbolic meaning process on a more macro level.

Levy's contribution to consumer research becomes clear when considering the many cultural and symbolic studies that have built on his work (McCraken 1986; Wallendorf and Arnould 1988). Levy argued that codes about age, sex, gender, and social status structure society and have an independent existence. Grant McCracken (1986) took this one step further by considering the processes by which cultural transformation occurs, that is, the transfer of meanings from one site to another. McCracken, like Levy, sees a culturally constituted world in which meaning, at a macro level, is transferred according to cultural categories and principles, concepts similar to Levy's symbolic structures (Holt 1995, 1998). Since goods fit into cultural categories and carry symbolic meaning, they become important manifestations of culture.

Consumer goods acquire meaning through transfer agents such as the advertising and fashion systems (Thompson and Haytko 1997). Objects represent concrete manifestations of

abstract meaning. Consumers use the meaning of the objects to help define their self-concept (Belk 1988; Thompson and Hirschman 1995). Meanings also act as arbiters between stability and change and maintain order in the consumer's life (McCracken 1988). Marketplace ideology and culture frame the horizons of possible actions, feelings, and thought, thus favoring some behaviors and sense-making more than others (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Thompson and Hirschman 1995). The one-way transfer process between an object and the individual consumer is accomplished through exchange, possession, grooming, and divestment rituals. Rook and Levy (1983) found that the motivation for grooming was a means of systematically coping with growing up in American society. When grooming, consumers use objects as symbolic extensions of themselves, a projection of their identity and current situation in the world.

Levy's insight that consumers use objects that carry cultural meaning to help define themselves, along with McCracken's (1986) description of meaning-transfer processes, have influenced others in their work on the role of the extended self (Belk 1988) and the role marketing exchange plays in today's consumption-based society (Sherry 1990; Holt 1995). Levy (1974) accurately predicted that work on symbolism would lead to other disciplines, such as anthropology, that understand marketing as a cultural process (Schouten and McAlexander 1995). A proliferation of qualitative and ethnographic studies have sought to understand how consumers use objects to construct their self-concept and to navigate this culturally socially constructed world (Wallendorf and Arnould 1988; Belk 1988; Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989; Wallendorf and Arnould 1991; Kozinets 2001; Penaloza 2001).

Levy's recognition of the symbolic nature of the marketplace has led other researchers to consider how consumers use and produce those symbolic resources in their own ways. Levy saw the consumer as a naturally contextualized, socially expressive, experiential being. Consumers are both productive and wasteful in, for instance, entertainment activities such as going to theaters, amusement parks, and resorts (Levy 2001, 2003). Levy (2003) saw conflict in and about marketing as persistent and essential to its nature. The marketplace is neither bad nor good. It is characterized by rich, diverse, and complex social relations. The work of Thompson and Hirschman (1995) and Thompson (2004) also sees the marketplace as providing consumers with numerous symbolic resources from which to construct individual and collective identities and to contest other discourses of power. Levy questioned the assumption that consumers fret about minute differences to maximize utility. This skepticism encouraged others to embrace pluralism, and today, postmodern perspectives have joined more traditional views (Firat and Venkatesh 1995).

Market Orientation

Kotler and Levy's (1969a) broadening of the marketing concept led them to consider the notion of "furthering" (Levy and Kotler 1969, 70). The role of a furthering officer was to mesh a firm's aims with those of the groups it serves in such a way as to both advance and allow for the exchange of value. The furthering officer coordinated the activities of the organization toward achieving its goals, and, consequently needed to scan the environment for intelligence on customers and competitors and to make sure all departments within a firm were communicating a consistent message to the consumer. Every product was part of a consumption system that exists to satisfy needs and wants. For a manufacturer to grasp new opportunities and innovate, three necessary conditions must be met: (a) knowledge of the goals of the customer; (b) knowledge of the system; and (c) awareness of the threats to the system (Boyd and Levy 1966). These ideas were echoed in the market-orientation literature of the 1990s (Narver and Slater 1990; Jaworski and Kohli 1993). Market orientation refers to the generation of market intelligence, the dissemination of the intelligence across departments, and the facilitation of organization-wide responsiveness to it (Jaworski and Kohli 1993).

The broadening of the marketing concept has accomplished a lot more besides laying the foundation for market orientation. It has allowed marketers and researchers the opportunity to apply marketing concepts in a wide variety of areas, such as nonprofit organizations and professionals, that had never considered using marketing principles in the past. As a result, marketing and market research have gained a more important place in society today. The speed with which the broader concept of marketing was adopted has led researchers to reconsider the impact of marketing as an ideological and cultural phenomenon. Levy played an important role in bringing pluralism to the field of marketing.

CONCLUSION

In reviewing Levy's body of work, a few things might be useful to remember. His ideas have not been overly complicated yet insightful for their time and practical. Most of his writing was in the form of thought pieces that pushed the philosophical boundaries of the field. By challenging the philosophical assumptions of functional utility of products, rational consumers, and a focus on the business firm, Levy developed a foundation for further work in the areas of brand image, symbolism, cultural meaning, and market orientation. By using philosophical pluralism, Levy grasped phenomena before others in the field. Progress came from thought and debate, which can only happen when researchers take dramatically different perspectives.

Regrettably, less of such thought-provoking debate is evident today. Levy saw himself as a skeptic, one who thinks about ideals and is wary of researchers who are too passionate about their particular point of view (Levy 2001). Reality can be observed, understood, and explained in many ways. Marketing researchers are just "people thinking about people

and giving a lot of emphasis to how they perceive themselves and their relations to the outside world and the products they consume" (Levy 2005, 344). However, some of the time, researchers are so interested in getting past reviewers that they ground their work in well-established theories and show how the relationship can be moderated, mediated, or manipulated in a series of experiments. While these improvements are important in theory development, few marketing researchers today consider marketing from a broadened, more aggregate perspective (Wilkie and Moore 2003) and push the philosophical boundaries of marketing. Marketing research needs to allow a freer flowing of ideas and knowledge, in short, a philosophical pluralism that gives scholars the freedom and confidence to create new conceptual schemes and perspectives (Peter and Olson 1983). This is where insights come from and how paradigm shifts can occur.

We owe a debt of gratitude to Sidney Levy for broadening marketing and giving succeeding generations of marketers a new knowledge foundation. Whether it has been brand image, symbolism, or the marketing concept, he has pushed the boundaries of the field. Now, we too must continue to push the philosophical boundaries of marketing.

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