

BUSINESS AT OXFORD

Can marketing kill the arts?

If research could predict what kinds of cars we want, why couldn't it anticipate the next literary masterpiece?

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BY KUNAL BASU

Marketing is everywhere—from the most private to the most public of places, and increasingly laying its claim to the holy land of the arts. Before finding out where marketing might take the arts, let's turn back to business to see where it came from.

In the 1970s, a profound shift occurred in the world of business. Till then, companies believed in the rather benign "product concept", which translated to: If you build a better mousetrap, the world will beat a path to your door.

Experts developed new mousetraps to offer to the market. It was the world of the "backroom": scientists, engineers and artists engaged in the solitary perfection of their craft.

Marketing, as we know it today, changed all that. In championing the "marketing concept", it ridiculed the mousetrap makers. Who cares about a better mousetrap? How can you be sure that consumers would want to buy it? It encouraged starting from the outside—the consumers' needs in order to please them in the end.

Standing between the makers and the buyers, the marketers discovered a role for themselves: the matchmakers. But the lure of marketing came from the promise of market research—a "scientific"

process capable of predicting consumers' needs and behaviours. Suddenly, everything seemed ripe for marketing—including the arts.

Are the arts different from cars and computers? Yes, if one were to subtract from it routine items of entertainment. Deriving its power from the power to surprise, they foster passion and wonder that is distinct from the instant gratification of daytime drama or a song contest.

Is it in marketing's gift to anticipate surprises? Even diehard marketers would grudgingly admit that tangibles are better measured than intangibles let alone our appetite for a truly creative experience—where we consumers are most idiosyncratic, least articulate, constantly shifting and downright unpredictable. The best brief that a marketer could give to an artist would be no more than to be unconventional and creatively unique.

Marketers, in fact, have displayed staggering myopia with tangibles as well. The president of 20th Century Fox claimed notoriously in 1946: "Video won't be around for more than six months. People will soon get tired of staring at a plywood box." And as late as in 1977, the chairman of Digital Equipment, a marketing guru, took an astute view of consumer behaviour: "There is no reason

anyone would want a computer in their home." Decca's rejection of the Beatles ("guitar groups are on their way out") isn't peculiar to arts marketing, but marketing.

Creativity in the arts can't come from researching the consumers. But it can be fostered by others—the backroom appraisers, passionate reviewers, and eventually, the word-of-mouth endorsement from adventurous audiences.

The best of these—commissioning editors, gallery curators, music label scouts and agents—are often the unsung heroes, who climb the mountain of "marketability" in order to see an innovative project through. Relying on human judgement, that eternally fallible but irreplaceable quality, it is they who place the risky bets against the scientific odds of research.

The power of marketing, its real power, lies not in idea generation or even in market creation, but in market expansion for an idea that is hovering secretly and subconsciously at the edge of acceptance. Its calling is that of a popularizer. The rest is its delusion.

Thus, the well-honed tricks of placement and distribution, promotion and tie-ins, can indeed stir up an audience that is late in getting to a new play, picking up that startling new novel, or trying out an unknown band's CD. Its techniques of extending reach and awareness are well-proven, and as long as the cause is good, the effects can be beneficial to artists.

As a propagator, marketing is not hostile to the arts. If anything, it



MALAY KARKAKAR/MINT

laying a row of identical golden eggs, or remaking popular films at the expense of new screenplays. It is the philosophy of seeing all that is good in simply good consumption.

With so much in our landscape guided already by the marketing ethic, it isn't far-fetched to imagine the spectre of marketing next stalking the arts. To counter it is to believe that art is enough for art's sake, not the sake of market share; and combating the logic of repeat purchase for a "proven product". It means, ultimately, standing up for the arts.

Unlike an arranged marriage, the creation and the appreciation of the arts is a spontaneous affair. Backstage orchestrations could kill the spirit, and end up wounding the actors. Perhaps, fatally so.

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could be a nice complement, lending a push to lethargic public imagination. Its threat lies in its ambitious self-concept—that it isn't simply a supportive function, but the raison d'être; more a grand philosophy than a set of techniques; the composer and the conductor, not simply the violinist. In a classic *Harvard Business Review* article titled *Marketing is Everything*, Regis McKenna claims: "Marketing will do more than sell. It will be the way a company does business."

That way is the way of the tyrannical matchmaker, arranging a union between the artist and the audience, based on the measured needs of one and the formulaic creation of the other. It is the way of seeing a successful novelist as a "product" capable of



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