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Marketing as Decision Support

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Foundations of Decision Science · Entry 24

Marketing as Decision Support Rather Than Promotion

Kotler · Drucker · Levitt · Lemon & Verhoef · Morgan & Hunt · Vargo & Lusch

Definition. Ask a room what "marketing" means and the first answers tend to arrive fast, ads, content, campaigns, attention, demand. That's a definition, yes, but it sits on the surface. The older, sturdier view, the one the field's early authorities kept circling back to, treats marketing as the work of understanding a customer's need so completely that the sensible choice practically announces itself. From that angle, marketing isn't the craft of steering people toward a product, it's the practice of making a decision easier to make. So the framework's move here isn't some detour away from tradition, it's a walk back to where the tradition began.

The Warehouse Report

For years I sat through quarterly marketing reviews that all ran on the same arithmetic. Fourteen posts. Three webinars. Two whitepapers. Six thousand impressions, up eleven percent. Everyone nodded at the counts, budget renewed, meeting adjourned.

Then one quarter, mostly out of orneriness, I asked a different question: which of these helped anyone decide anything?

The silence had a texture to it. We had a complete accounting of everything we'd shipped and no record of anyone we'd helped. That's a warehouse report, not a marketing review, and I'd been presenting a version of it my whole career.

The uncomfortable follow-up was worse. When we ran the question backward, interviewing recent clients about what had moved them, the assets they named were almost never the celebrated ones. The award show was for the campaigns. The gratitude was for a modest buyer's guide, an honest comparison piece, a memo one of our people had written helping a committee frame its own decision, including the option of hiring nobody. The unglamorous stuff that helped people choose kept showing up in the closed-won stories, and the impressive stuff that promoted us kept showing up in the budget.

I've since learned that the field's founding thinkers would have found none of this surprising. They'd said it from the start. We'd just stopped listening somewhere between the invention of the impression and the invention of the dashboard.

The Canon Never Said Marketing Was Promotion

Drucker said it with his usual spare force. In The Practice of Management (1954), a business exists to create a customer. In Management (1973), marketing's job is to know that customer so well that the offering fits and, in his phrasing, selling becomes superfluous. When marketing is done right, pressure gives way to fit.

Levitt, in "Marketing Myopia," pushed the same point as a warning. Companies stumble when they describe themselves by what they produce instead of the need they satisfy. Railroads told themselves they were in the railroad business, not transportation, and the future passed them by. Start with the customer's need, both men argued, not with the seller's inventory.

Kotler folded that stance into the modern field's core definition. Marketing, as he frames it, means finding needs and creating value to meet them, not just talking up value after the fact. His dividing line still holds: a selling orientation begins with what the firm wants to move, a marketing orientation begins with what the customer needs. Promotion belongs inside marketing, but only as one activity among many, it was never the whole job, and the best minds never treated it that way.

Trust and Commitment Are the Engine

When research attention shifted from single transactions to ongoing relationships, the same pair of forces kept reappearing. Morgan and Hunt's commitment trust theory made the point plain: relationship marketing works when trust and commitment are present. With them, cooperation grows, conflict becomes manageable, and ties last. Without them, they don't.

This is the discipline speaking in its own voice, and it lands close to Decision Architecture's center of gravity. Trust makes commitment possible, and commitment is what marketing ultimately tries to earn. As academic anchors go, it's hard to find one that sits nearer to the core claim in Decision Architecture.

Value Is Co-Created, Not Delivered

Vargo and Lusch then turned the idea of value itself. In service dominant logic, value isn't a finished object a firm packs into a product and hands over. It's made with the customer, in use, inside the customer's world. A firm can offer a value proposition, but whether value happens is decided by the customer, in context. Marketing, in that telling, supports an unfolding process, it doesn't ship a sealed outcome.

Lemon and Verhoef carry the same instinct across time. Marketing is accountable for the full customer journey and experience, not just the acquisition moment. Put these strands together and you get a discipline whose work runs through the customer's deciding and using, end to end, more steady support than persuasion burst.

Why This Belongs in Decision Architecture

Decision Architecture defines marketing as the deliberate design of engagement that matches how decisions really form. Less preoccupied with being persuasive, more intent on being useful at the moment it matters. Read beside the canon, that isn't a wild claim. It's Drucker, Levitt, and Kotler restated with the customer's decision brought to the foreground.

Morgan and Hunt offer the mechanism, trust and commitment. Vargo and Lusch supply the posture, co-creation rather than delivery. Decision Architecture isn't rejecting marketing, it's returning the field to its own best definition, then tightening the lens.

That's also what separates Trust-Sequenced Marketing from the awareness and promotion models that still dominate practice. Those models begin with the firm's message and push outward. Decision support starts somewhere else, with the buyer's uncertainty, and then works to reduce it. This isn't about tone, style, or polish. It's about purpose. One approach exists to be noticed. The other exists to help someone choose.

AI has a way of forcing the issue. If marketing is promotion, meaning the production of more material to push out into the world, then AI has made that close to free. And what becomes free, in endless supply, slides toward being worth almost nothing. A firm that confuses marketing with content output risks being buried under its own volume, plus everyone else's.

Decision support lasts because it depends on what AI can't print on demand, a real grasp of a specific buyer's situation, and the trust Morgan and Hunt placed at the center. Machines make promotion abundant and real decision help scarce. Put differently, they've made the canon's point feel newly concrete. Marketing that only promotes is now worth about what it costs. Marketing that helps a person decide is what remains worth paying attention to.

The Marketing Read

Everything in this library funnels into one working question, and it fits on a sticky note: what decision does this help someone make?

So put the question on the content calendar, literally, as a column. For every planned asset: which decision, for which buyer, at which stage of the sequence? The precontemplator being helped to name their problem, the committee member being armed for the hallway, the champion being supplied for the trial you can't attend, the quiet reader working through page nine. If a row can't fill that column, it isn't marketing yet. It's promotion with a deadline, and the machines have made that free, which means your buyers are already drowning in everyone else's.

Build the decision-support shelf on purpose, because the assets clients thank you for share a shape: the honest buyer's guide, the comparison that includes when not to hire you, the readiness diagnostic, the questions-to-ask-any-firm checklist, the cost-of-staying-put worksheet. Every one of them helps a buyer move through their own decision, each one demonstrates the understanding Drucker said makes selling superfluous, and each one is nearly impossible for a competitor to copy, because counterfeiting it would require helping.

Then change what you count. The warehouse metrics, output, impressions, engagement, measure promotion, and they'll happily grow while your pipeline starves. The decision-support metric requires asking humans a question: in every win interview and every loss interview, "what did you read, use, or hear that helped you decide?" Whatever gets named is your marketing. Fund it. Whatever never gets named, no matter how it performs on the dashboard, is inventory.

Keep the support running past the signature, because Vargo and Lusch's point, joined to Entry 20's, means the deciding never really stops. The client re-deciding in month two, the champion defending the renewal, the buyer becoming a referrer, each is a decision your marketing can keep supporting, and almost no firm's marketing does.

What backfires: joining the volume war. Answering AI-cheapened content with more AI-cheapened content is the one strategy guaranteed to fail on its own terms, a race to produce the most of what's worth the least.

The hard call: at the next planning meeting, run my orneriness experiment. Ask which of last quarter's output helped anyone decide anything, and sit in the silence for a minute before anyone rescues the room. What survives that question is your marketing department. What doesn't was a very expensive printing operation, and the machines just made printing free.

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