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SUMMARY OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS

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Virtuous Marketing - Model of ethical marketing communication

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KEYWORDS

Marketing ethics; virtuous marketing; email communication; ethical communication.

SUMMARY

The research explores the complexities of modern marketing, emphasising the ethical challenges and the need to integrate values such as integrity and transparency into communication strategies. The paper introduces the concept of “virtuous marketing” and outlines the main findings of the research: the definition of an applicable ethical model and its contribution to building trust between suppliers and customers.

If the scientific study of marketing has a long and consistent evolution, the ethical challenges of marketing activities have also accompanied this evolution from the very beginning. These challenges are not solved today, but become even more complex and numerous as specific industries develop specific marketing strategies and as consumers develop increasingly complex sensibilities, needs and demands. The evolution of marketing from product-centred to customer-centred and then to value-centred marketing can be paralleled by the evolution of ethical concerns in marketing, from resolving various ethical dilemmas arising in a crisis situation to a permanent and sustained concern to create a business environment with good ethical practices, sometimes referred to as Relationship Marketing and Quality Relationship.

The contribution of this thesis comes in this direction of a permanent ethically sound relationship between the service provider and the customer. Thus, the research has been directed towards the study of marketing ethics in the field of services, with the research question on virtuous marketing: what characterises it and what would be a virtuous marketing model within the broader framework of marketing ethics.

Finally, while it is obvious that, in addition to the concrete techniques of classic marketing, there is always a need for a humane and ethical solution to deal with sales and customer communication, this solution is very difficult to quantify and always different depending on the situation. The present research is important because it comes in this direction of concrete identification of best practices.

On the other hand, if much of the theories and models of business ethics focus on obvious and pressing ethical crises or dilemmas, where the manager has to make a decision for a specific dilemma, the need for ethical behaviour is equally present in a situation that is not necessarily a crisis, so that ethical conduct and action with integrity is always present. It is in this direction that a good deal of the studies of Relationship Marketing, Quality Relationship and virtue ethics applied to marketing have focussed. The present research question and objective go in the

direction of research applicable not only to crisis situations, but also to long-term relationships with the people involved.

The main interest of this paper was to explore how marketing can achieve an ethical level in relation to virtues. To the extent that ethical actions represent a perfection of human activity, and marketing considered in its concrete dimension is one of the possible activities of human relationships, the approach of the two dimensions, marketing and virtue, was the basis of the research interest.

The main question that this research seeks to answer is to what extent can marketing be practised by practising virtues? What would be a virtuous way to promote a company and its services? One of the aims of the paper is therefore to identify the dimensions of virtuous marketing: what are those dimensions, or characteristics, that define and give consistency to virtuous marketing? From this starting point, the final objective of the paper was to identify a model that would make it possible, in as many concrete situations as possible, to analyse the options and take a virtuous marketing decision.

Starting from the author's personal interest in virtuous marketing, the paper has attempted to harmonise a dual purpose. Firstly, to provide a response to an increasingly acute problem that has arisen as a result of the development of electronic means of communication. The first general aim of the research was therefore to find ways of practising virtuous marketing. A second general aim, equally important, was to identify a virtuous communication model. This requires a rigorous, scientific analysis, a commitment that not every supplier is willing to make.

The main objective of the research was to identify and develop a virtuous communication model, based on the elements identified in the various existing research on ethical communication in general. This main objective was complemented by two sub-objectives. The first was to identify a mode of communication specific to a quality service provider. In particular, this involved initiating a dialogue at the initiative of the provider. This dialogue, once started, generated a series of questions and hypotheses, through which it was possible to arrive at the answers implied by this first sub-objective.

The second sub-objective was to identify a way to select both the beneficiary and the problem itself that the beneficiary is facing and how the beneficiary can be helped to solve the problem. After all, without identifying these two components of the second sub-objective, it becomes impossible to harmonise the interference necessary to achieve the overall research objective. By linking the first sub-objective to the second, a dialectical dynamic has made it possible to outline and finally define the model of virtuous communication.

The research started from a general hypothesis that virtuous marketing generates professional and business co-operation even in the absence of a previous relationship between the provider and the recipient. The definition of this hypothesis was based on direct observations over several years where service marketing messages to strangers began to generate requests for co-operation. The observations have been supplemented and deepened by changing the mode of communication in successive stages. In spite of longer or shorter messages, proposals for co-operation continued, but at different paces. Hence the hypothesis mentioned above.

This first hypothesis has been complemented by the hypothesis that virtuous marketing communication can be framed in a model applicable to several areas of activity. By analysing some of the variables proposed in the present research, stable and repetitive modes of action were identified, as well as consistent results from discussions and communications.

Although several sub-hypotheses could have been tested, the identification and testing of these two hypotheses, through the methodology used, generated a sufficient number of issues and variables. The elements that could still have been considered and tested have been indicated in the section dealing with future directions for analysis and research.

These two hypotheses have led to several methodological choices and thus had a decisive impact on the structure of the paper. In a first stage, it was necessary to explore past experiences by analysing "success stories". In a second stage, a quantitative method was chosen so that larger amounts of data could be analysed. Finally, in a last stage, an attempt was made to complement the quantitative results with a qualitative analysis of the representations of people who responded positively to the requests from the quantitative research.

On this basis, the methodology was therefore divided into three main stages. In the first stage, the in-depth interview was chosen as an exploratory research method, using a conversation guide to understand the representations of people who had been contacted in the past and who had become permanent, stable customers. They were chosen on the basis of an analysis of the interviewees' background, so as to ensure that the respondents were representative and comparable, both in terms of their initial approach and in terms of their positioning in an economic, political and social framework that was as unified as possible.

The second stage was the most important and difficult part, in terms of scope and analysis. It was chosen to use a direct observation experiment, based on a sample of more than 650 companies, to which emails were sent. These were written in close relation to two key dimensions identified in the previous step, namely the reputation of the service provider and its transparency, each with two variables. It was thus possible to send more than 650 messages, divided in such a way as to

allow a quantitative analysis of the results and an interpretation that responded to the research hypotheses.

The last stage attempted to validate what was analysed in the previous stage. Further qualitative research using the in-depth interview method was used to understand the mental representations of the respondents. Here, further messages, including a conversation guide, were sent to the people who were initially contacted and who, based on this initial message, responded in various ways. The mere fact of the response was considered sufficient to complete the research with an address that would allow an understanding of the respondents' representations, their understanding of the whole process, and any elements that could not be anticipated in the quantitative research.

The paper is of interest primarily to researchers in the area of virtuoso marketing. Another interest is of note to service recipients, as they generally shy away from the constant and tedious approaches they receive from an unmanageable number of providers. A third interest concerns communication and online marketing companies. They often tend to abstract the desired message and deliver it to as many people as possible, regardless of the risks associated with impersonal, or generic, communication. Finally, a last interest is directed at sales professionals in general, who want to enrich their perspective and understand a niche with which they are unfamiliar.

The results of the present research are, to a large extent, in line with, and there is a consensus with, the research in the literature. After all, recent research points to the need for a return to the fundamentals of ethical marketing, in particular values such as integrity, reputation and transparency in business. All the research has demonstrated the importance attached to services by potential clients, who have positioned themselves in a way that allows them to enter into a co-operative relationship in the field of intellectual property services.

At the same time, the research carried out in the current period demonstrates the existence of an economic and values crisis, latent or explicit in the last thirty years worldwide, with effects also on the study of marketing and marketing activities. The present research proposes a model which, through the results obtained, demonstrates that it is oriented towards efficient, low-cost means and the customisation of the message conveyed to consumers. All these aspects demonstrate the topicality and the alignment of the research results with recent results of specialised research.

The originality of this research lies in the proposal and validation of a virtuous marketing model, built on ethical principles such as integrity, transparency and mutual respect. The research is differentiated by its integrated approach to ethical marketing, in particular by the applicability of this model in different contexts, including the management of unsolicited communications. In an area where ethical norms and standards are often ignored in favour of short-term commercial

objectives, the paper contributes a new methodological and conceptual framework, adapted to both market realities and modern consumer sensitivities.

An additional element of originality is the integration of a hybrid methodology, combining quantitative and qualitative methods to capture both objective and subjective aspects of virtuous marketing. The study started with empirical observations from professional practice, continued with the analysis of concrete cases and explored, through interviews and observations, beneficiaries' perceptions of communication ethics. This approach allows a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon and provides a solid basis for the development of the proposed model.

It also brings to the forefront a frequently overlooked issue - the framing of unsolicited communications within an ethical framework. This topic, although often controversial, is addressed in an innovative way by proposing principles and steps to transform these interactions into a transparent and respectful endeavour. Unsolicited communications are thus reframed from a negative perspective into an opportunity to initiate a valuable dialogue with potential clients, helping to build a relationship based on trust.

Another innovative aspect of the research is the focus on the dynamics of the relationship between the two main actors: the service provider and the beneficiary. By analysing the interactions between them, the paper highlights the importance of achieving a common comfort zone where both parties feel valued and respected. This aspect is essential in the implementation of virtuous marketing and represents a dimension rarely studied in the specialised literature.

The proposed model is based on universal ethical principles but is flexible enough to be applied in different cultural and economic contexts. This universality is another element of originality, which makes the research results relevant to both marketing theory and practice.

The research emphasises that virtuous marketing is a viable solution for integrating ethics into business strategies. Traditional models focus on efficiency, but the paper emphasises the importance of introducing values such as integrity, empathy and transparency to create sustainable business relationships. The analysis therefore identified two fundamental dimensions, reputation and transparency. Supplier reputation was correlated with a higher level of customer acceptance of and transparency was perceived as a key factor in creating an open and honest dialogue. The virtuous marketing model demonstrates remarkable flexibility, applicable across multiple industries and markets. In the context of unsolicited communications, the model was validated by increased response rates to messages that met ethical criteria.

The qualitative study showed that empathy plays a central role in virtuous marketing, as it is a trait that facilitates trust-building between supplier and recipient. This finding is supported by the exploratory interview data. The results suggest that an ethical marketing strategy not only improves consumer perception but also has a positive impact on commercial success. The proposed model generated a significant increase in consumer interest in services promoted through ethical messages.

The research also demonstrated that the virtuous marketing model is aligned with theories of business ethics, such as those based on virtue, integrity and shared morality. At the same time, empirical tests have confirmed the practical applicability of these principles in customer communication. Although the model was generally well received, a segment of respondents perceived unsolicited communications as intrusive regardless of the ethical approach. This result highlights the need to adjust and personalise the strategy according to the target audience.

Using a mixed methodology - quantitative and qualitative - has allowed a deeper understanding of the impact of virtues in marketing. This has contributed to the development of a model that is applicable and easily replicable across industries. The results indicate a significant potential for extending virtuous marketing in sectors such as health, education or public administration, where trust and transparency are priorities.

This synthesis of the results and analyses highlights the relevance and applicability of the research, demonstrating the usefulness of a marketing model that combines commercial efficiency with fundamental ethical values. The research findings confirm the relevance of virtuous marketing as an ethical and practical tool. Through the theoretical contributions and the proposed model, the paper opens new perspectives for further research and the applicability of ethics in marketing, providing a solid foundation for the advancement of the field.