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**SWP 17/93 DEFINING THE MARKET: AN EXPLORATION
OF MARKETING MANAGERS' COGNITIVE
FRAMEWORKS**

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**DEFINING THE MARKET: AN EXPLORATION OF MARKETING MANAGERS'
COGNITIVE FRAMEWORKS**

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The activity of marketing and the concept of the market are inextricably linked. In an organisational sense, the role of the marketing function is to understand and interpret the market to enable the organisation to achieve its corporate objectives. As the market is central to the activity of marketing, its definition and scope will determine the focus of the marketing activity. Levitt's seminal paper, *Marketing Myopia* (1960), emphasises the importance of how organisations frame or define their markets. In discussing the demise of a US railroad company, Levitt considers that because they defined their market as railroads, rather than transportation, they lost customers by failing to appreciate the nature of the needs which they were satisfying. At an operational level, the importance of market definition is implicit in the array of marketing tools which are available to enhance the process of marketing management. Tools such as the Product Life Cycle (Cox, 1967) and the Boston Matrix (Heldey, 1977) all require input based on an objective and quantifiable market definition.

The Nature of Market Definitions

A rudimentary scan through established marketing texts indicates that market definition is generally dealt with as a brief precursor to the intricacies of the marketing mix, marketing analysis and marketing strategy. Marketing theorists are relatively consistent in their position that the market is defined in terms of potential consumers, who are able to acquire products to satisfy particular needs or wants. Kotler (1991) provides an exemplary definition from the marketing literature:

"A market consists of all the potential customers sharing a particular need or want who might be willing and able to engage in exchange to satisfy that need or want."

Kotler (1991: 8)

Similar definitions to the above, can be found in the majority of main stream marketing texts. This view is further endorsed by the literature on market segmentation, the overall market definition being subdivided into identifiable sets of buyers, which are often given descriptors based on demographic or psychographic profiles (Tynan & Drayton, 1987).

At the functional level, therefore, marketing theory defines markets as groups of customers. At a strategic level, market definition is used in a wider context and is central to the positioning of an organisation within the business environment. The concept of product/market linkages which connects the customer to the organisation's capabilities pervades the strategic management literature, e.g. Ansoff's product/market growth matrix (Ansoff, 1965). In this concept of market definition, the customer is linked to the product and the technology used to create it. Abell (1980) uses three dimensions for defining the business in which an organisation operates; customer group, customer function and the technological dimension, which defines how the customer's needs are being met.

Day (1981) identifies these differing perspectives for defining markets as top-down (strategic) and bottom-up (operational). The top-down perspective is concerned with competitive capability and resource transferability, the bottom-up with customer requirements and usage patterns. The implication of Day's framework, is that market definition, rather than being a static concept, is likely to vary within the organisation at differing decision levels.

Market definition is a central concept in defining the organisations domain, at both the operational and strategic levels. If market definition is such a central element in the way an organisation operates, what is known about how organisations define their markets? Curran & Goodfellow (1990) note the paucity of research in this area and, whilst economists have focused on this subject, there is still a lack of consensus as to how markets can or should be

defined. If the theorists are unable to agree, what about the practitioners? It appears, that in this regard, defining markets remains a highly problematic activity:

"The idea of markets should be a construct which enables us to simplify and therefore observe and predict consumer behaviour. The practice, however, too often reflects the companies' internal issues and history."

Knight, (1991: 17)

Knight (1991) expresses the view that, in practice, the market definition of organisations is a function of internal factors, such as the production process and organisational structure. This is in contrast to the marketing literature, which focuses on external factors such as customer groupings and usage patterns. Evidently, there is a gap between this view of marketing practice and marketing theory. McDonald (1992), estimates that less than a quarter of UK companies utilise formal analysis techniques in the marketing planning process, one reason attributed to such a low rate of adoption being the problematic issue of defining the market in which they operate.

Market definition is, therefore, a paradoxical issue, at one level simplistic and at another apparently complex. It is frequently an issue which is taken for granted. Organisations believe it to be commonly understood and clearly defined, yet the evidence indicates that it is often misunderstood and likely to vary at differing organisational levels and contexts. Research in this area has tended to be normative or prescriptive and there is little evidence as to how organisations actually define their markets at different levels of decision making, and whether such definitions are reflected in the marketing theory.

Interpretive Research Approaches

Within the broader area of managerial research, there is a body of literature which appraises the impact of the perceptual process on managerial behaviour. Such research is broadly described as interpretive. It seeks to elicit how individuals interpret their environments. Interpretive management research has indicated that managers respond to increasing complexity with increased simplification (Duhaime & Schwenk, 1985; Schwenk, 1984), and that they may also bias, distort or filter stimuli to support their existing

belief structures (Barnes, 1984; Walsh, 1988). If such interpretations affect the nature of marketing decision making, it is important that we understand how such managers interpret or define their markets.

Research has been undertaken in the strategic management area, to determine how managers interpret their competitive environments. Porac & Thomas (1989) elicited the mental maps which managers hold of their competitors. This research revealed that managers' tended to select only a limited number of firms against which they believed they were competing. Porac & Thomas (1990) describe such phenomena as, 'cognitive oligopolies'. Reger (1988) elicited the dimensions which managers were using to assess their competitors. This revealed a number of dimensions which were not evident in the literature, thus providing an indication that interpretive approaches to research may bring new understanding to managerial processes and behaviour.

With the exception of the work on competitors, there appears to have been little application of interpretive research approaches to determine how managers define their markets. Stubbart & Ramaprasad (1988) used cognitive mapping to explore the views of two industry leaders and identified differences in their maps in terms of reference to customers and international orientation. Dichtl *et al* (1983) utilised the concept of psychological distance to explain managers' orientation toward foreign investment, a concept which has been supported by more recent studies (Williams, 1991). None of these studies, however, have attempted to assess the wider market definition within which organisations, or managers, define their area of operation.

Interpretive Research for Defining Markets

In order to investigate this issue of interpretive market definitions, this study is guided by two research questions emanating from the current literature:

Research Question 1

What type of market definition would we expect market managers to hold?

As managers working at an operational level, it would be reasonable to expect that marketing managers would see their markets as groups of potential customers. They are also likely to segment markets, on the basis of the characteristics of customers and their usage of the product. At strategic decision making levels, it may be expected that technology and product issues would become further integrated into the market definition, as suggested by Abell (1980) and Day (1981).

Research Question 2

Would we expect the nature of market definition to vary across industries?

The second question deals with the effects of different industries. It is an accepted view that industries tend to hold common sets of assumptions and beliefs. These have been termed industry recipes (Spender, 1989). It can, therefore, be expected that organisations within an industry are likely to have common frameworks for defining their markets, *i.e.* there is an industry norm as to how the market is defined.

Methodology

A body of literature exists within the strategic management perspective, which attempts to construct interpretive frameworks of how managers make sense of their world. This methodology has been broadly termed as cognitive mapping (see Huff, 1990, for an overview). The approach taken in this paper, is to attempt to map the cognitive frameworks which marketing managers hold for defining their markets. This will be undertaken by eliciting the categories of concepts which managers use to describe their markets. In order to do this, a conceptual framework is adopted to provide a protocol for the interviewing methodology. This is, firstly, to define the broad market in which they operate *i.e.* the working parameters of the market place and secondly to define the partitions within the market *i.e.* the key segmentation variables which are being used.

As this study is essentially exploratory, an idiographic approach is used (Eden et al, 1979). In this context, concepts are developed from the respondents and categorised following their elicitation. This is in contrast to using a structured approach, such as a questionnaire, which would involve presenting the respondent with a *priori* assumptions about the nature of market definition. Whilst this introduces a greater level of face validity to the data, as the respondent is using concepts and phrases with which he or she is comfortable, it increases the complexity and judgemental nature of the analysis.

The interviews were carried out by two of the authors. They followed a semi-structured interview format involving open ended questions, followed by a prompting structure to move from the abstract (How would you define the term market?) to the more concrete (what are the important elements in your market?). The purpose of this format was to allow the respondents to use their own language and concepts, placing emphasis on reducing the input of the interviewer and maximising the output from the interviewee. The interviews lasted between thirty minutes and one hour and were recorded and transcribed for the purpose of analysis.

Sample

The largest fifty five major companies from within both the food and brewing sectors were identified, using the Kompass directory. Telephone calls were made to ascertain the identity of the marketing manager, or equivalent and these were then sent a letter of introduction, explaining the nature of the research and requesting an interview. Following a series of follow up phone calls, a total of eighteen interviews were completed with the marketing managers of nine organisations in the food sector and nine within the brewing sector.

Analysis

The analysis stage involved *post hoc* categorisation of the transcripts. All three researchers independently analysed the transcripts, using the framework outlined earlier, to categorise the concepts provided by the respondent. Further categories were developed based on the content of the transcript *i.e.* free form categorisation (*e.g.* Reger, 1988). Following independent coding, the transcripts were discussed across the three researchers, the purpose being to remove anomalies and provide an agreed framework for each respondent (Brown, 1992).

Results

Research Question 1: What type of market definition would we expect market managers to hold?

As all of the respondents had operational responsibility for the marketing decisions related to their company's or business unit's products, it was anticipated that the operational and functional nature of their position would mirror the view of the marketing literature, that markets were essentially groups of customers. In the discussion revolving around the respondent's broad understanding of the market, eight concept categories were identified. These are listed in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Concept Categories for Broad Market Definition

Market Concept	Frequency	% Respondents
Product	16	89%
Channel	5	28%
Consumer	3	17%
Brands	2	11%
Geography	2	11%
Consumer Function	2	11%
Product Volume	1	6%
Packaging	1	6%

The output of the analysis at the broad market definition level, appears contrary to the view which dominates the marketing literature. The consumer, or the final customer, was only mentioned by three respondents, and consumer function mentioned by two. The dominant concept is product, which was identified in sixteen of the eighteen transcripts. In six transcripts, product was the only concept identified in the discussion on market definition, examples being the beer market and the wrapped sliced loaf market. This analysis provides an indication that the current theoretical descriptors of market definition are not being applied in practice. It also surfaces the concept of channel, or intermediary, as an important element in the way that these particular managers define their markets. In line with Abell's (1980) multidimensional approach to market definition, the majority of cases combined these concepts in some way, e.g. "the food retail market" encompasses both product based concepts and channel based concepts; the

leisure market for beer incorporates customer function and product based concepts. The only unitary grouping to occur was the product concept in isolation (six respondents).

Perhaps surprisingly, fewer concepts were identified at the segmentation level than at the broad market definition level. These are outlined in Table 2.

Table 2: Concept Categories for Defining Market Segments

Segment Concept	Frequency % Respondents	
Channel (Customer Type)	13	72%
Product Characteristics	11	61%
Consumer Type	11	61%
Consumer Function	4	22%
Geography	2	11%
Level of Branding	1	6%

As can be seen from Table 2, there were three dominant concepts for segmenting the market: channel (e.g. on trade/off trade for the brewery sector; multiple or wholesale channels for the food sector); product characteristics (e.g. lagers/ales for the brewers; ambient/frozen for the food manufacturers) and consumer type (e.g. teenage/adult). Some of these were used in combination to produce segments defined by a number of these concepts. However, many respondents (7) only used one of these concepts to define their market segment. A further analysis was undertaken to combine the broad market and segmentation concepts into an integrated market map. These maps represent the overall categoric structure of their market definition. All the elements within the market maps generated can be categorised into product, channel or consumer concepts. The distribution of these concepts is outlined in Table 3. In overall terms, the market maps were dominated by product concepts, every respondent incorporating a product based concept in their maps, whereas 28% of these maps did not include a consumer based concept.

Table 3: Overall Concept Categories Within Market Map

Concept Categories	Frequency	% Respondents
Product/Channel/Consumer	10	55%
Product/Channel	3	17%
Product/Consumer	3	17%
Product	2	11%

Two exemplars of such maps are shown in Figures 1 & 2. Figure 1 shows a three concept map, where the manager has integrated three concept groups; product, channel and consumer. In contrast, Figure 2 illustrates a single concept map. In this case, all the concepts within the map are product based descriptors. Analysis across all the market maps indicated a high level of idiosyncrasy at both the structural and content levels. Of the eighteen respondents, only three shared identical maps. This modal map is shown in Figure 3. It should be noted that the modal map does not contain any consumer concepts.

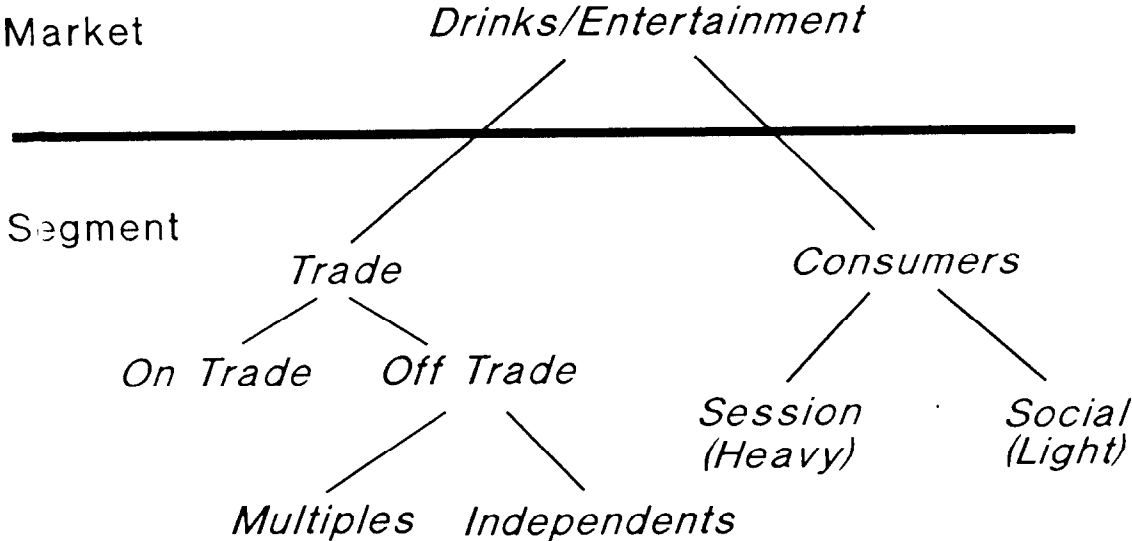


Figure 1: Example of Tri-concept Map (Product, Channel & Consumer)

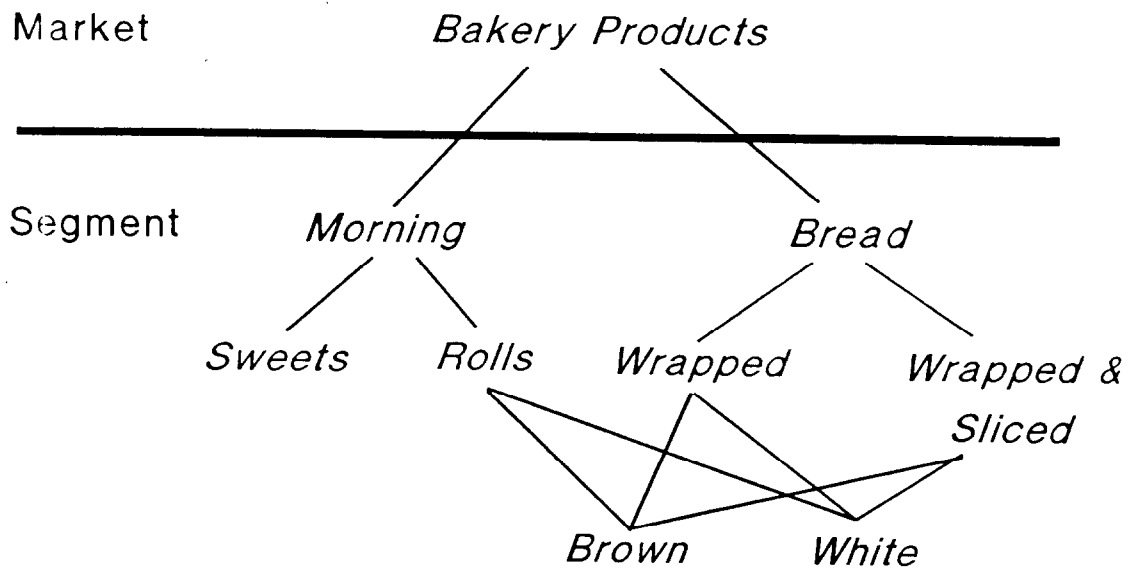


Figure 2: Example of Uni-concept Map (Product)

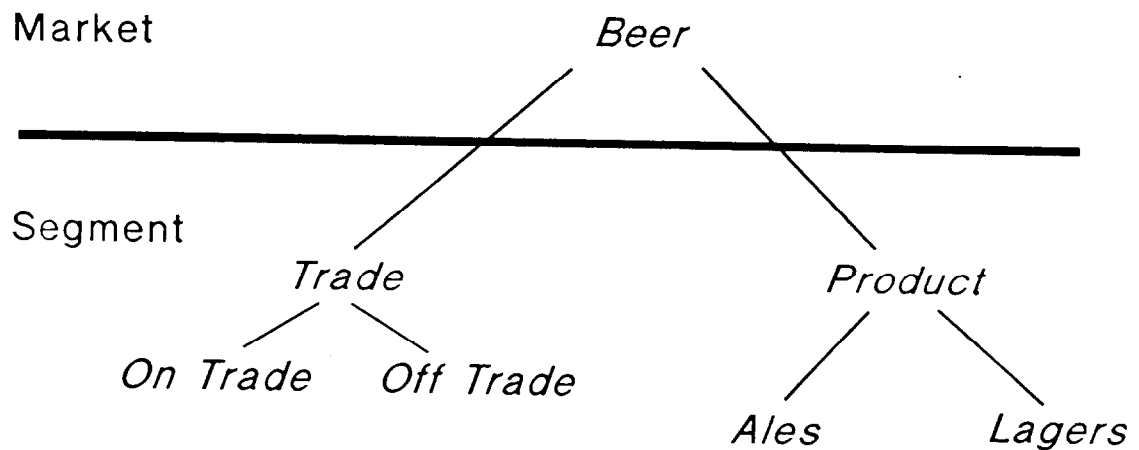


Figure 3: Modal scoring map (3 Respondents)

Research Question 2: What differences exist between industry interpretations of market definition?

Table 4 illustrates the distribution of concept categories between the two industry sectors. Due to the small sample size, it is not possible to determine significant differences between these two sectors. At a descriptive level, they are broadly similar, with a noticeable

difference in scores for the channel category, the brewing sector incorporating this concept into more of their individual maps. It is also of note that the modal map, illustrated in Figure 3, is provided by three marketing managers, all of whom work within the brewing sector. This tentative analysis indicates that product/channel concepts may be dominant in the market definitions of the brewing sector, and is perhaps due to the level of vertical integration within this particular industry. The general implication is that there may be industry norms for the market maps, which are explained by the structure and nature of that particular industry.

Table 4: Concept Categories by Industry Sector

Concept	Brewing	Food
Product	9 (100%)	9 (100%)
Channel	8 (89%)	5 (56%)
Consumer	7 (78%)	6 (67%)

The output of this research supports the view that there is a disparity between the way in which markets are defined in the marketing literature, and the way in which they are defined in practice. The product concept dominated the market definitions elicited from this group of marketing managers. Every respondent included a product based concept at the broad or segment level of their market definition. In contrast, 28% of the respondents had no consumer, or final customer, based concepts within their view of the market.

The question which this finding raises, is whether the product concept is dominant, because these managers define their market at a strategic level, and therefore include the resource based concepts outlined by Abell (1980) and Day (1981), or whether they are displaying a product orientation, and suffering from the myopia which Levitt (1960) observed. The research also indicates that further concepts for defining markets, which are not emphasised in the literature, may be obtained through interpretive studies of this type. The importance of the channel concept in the context of the brewing industry was identified through the elicitation of the market maps.

The implications for managers are that they need to develop a clearer appreciation of their own, individual market

definitions. What definitions do they implicitly utilise in their decision making? Is such a definition appropriate for the range of decisions which they need to make? Is market definition taken for granted in their organisation? Do marketing teams, or sales teams share similar market definitions or are they, as was the case in this study, highly variable across individuals?

For researchers, further work is required to determine the relationship between market definitions and types of decisions, to understand the possible dynamics and variability of market definition. A further dimension is to understand the organisational or social aspects of market definition. Is there an organisational definition which determines the way the organisation sees the marketing environment, or are they idiosyncratic frameworks which will vary greatly within organisations?

This research is exploratory and has therefore tended to raise questions rather than answer them. These questions, however, are fundamental to our understanding of the evident gap between marketing theory and marketing practice.

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