Fellow’S Award Marketplace Intelligence: Mindreading, Machiavellianism and Magic

Peter Wright, University of Oregon

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FELLOWS AWARD
MARKETPLACE INTELLIGENCE: MINDREADING, MACHIAVELLIANISM AND MAGIC

Peter Wright, University of Oregon

It made me very happy to be given the ACR Fellow award, both for the honor and for the opportunity it gave me to share some ideas with so many colleagues at the ACR Conference. It strikes me that we should create these opportunities more often, that is, inviting someone to simply share whatever thoughts or speculations they’ve been playing with lately. I looked at prior Fellows addresses for hints on what to talk about. Some were professional, some personal, and some playful. I asked my partner-in-life, Marian Friestad, what to talk about and she said, “I always like it when someone says things that stretch my mind a little.” So that’s what I have tried to do here—to talk about ideas Marian and I and our student colleagues have debated a lot in the last few years, but do so in a way that stretches my own and other people’s thinking a tad, and that is personal and playful. Our topic has been what we have called everyday persuasion knowledge, the beliefs about how persuasion happens that laypeople draw on in constructing their everyday persuasion attempts and coping with other people’s attempts to influence them (Friestad and Wright, 1994, 1996, 1999).

Being playful and personal meant showing the attending audience at the ACR conference lots of “harmless visual stimuli” and physical props, without sticking to a formal script. Those who were there may recall, for example, imagined medieval marketplaces filled with dinosaurs, or Saturday Evening Post covers from the early 1900’s, or Nancy Drew books and Batman comics. That multimedia experience cannot be recreated here. Instead, this piece of writing presents the gist of what I intended to convey in my address, the distilled themes nd thoughts I think are worth some attention.

The proper ambience is vital to scholarly reflection. With this in mind, I had prepped for this talk by spending two weeks with Marian in a 16th century palazzo in Florence overlooking the Piazza Santa Croce. Santa Croce is the Florentine neighborhood where Leonardo Da Vinci grew up. (I, like Leonardo, am a man of Florence; in my case, Florence, Massachusetts.) It was easy to imagine him walking across the piazza each morning, entering the Santa Croce church Early in the morning, I could stand alone in that church facing its entry. Looking to my left I would see the marble tomb of Galileo! On my right was Dante! Such moments tended to give one a sense of humility in preparing to have one’s “contributions” honored.

But then I discovered I could look back over my left shoulder and see the tomb of another Florentine Renaissance figure who has haunted people’s minds—Niccolo Machiavelli. And I thought, maybe ideas about influence and persuasion in everyday human affairs are noteworthy. The name of Machiavelli resonates in our ears with historical importance. On returning, I searched for books with “Machiavelli” as their subject. In the University of Oregon library there are over 250 of them! I grew curious. Why so much attention? Reading about Niccolo Machiavelli’s life increased the puzzlement. By all accounts, his contemporaries in the late 1400’s and early 1500’s thought of him as a functionary, a bad poet, a nice scholarly guy who was in his own everyday bureaucratic career ineffectual. Not someone who in his lifetime wielded power or even influenced strongly those who did. I sought out his most notorious writings. Machiavelli’s little The Prince (not to be confused with The Little Prince) was not even published in his lifetime! It was published four years after his death.

All this led me to two insights. One is how much fascination people have shown in the last four centuries over the effects and ethics of human social strategies. The development, diffusion and everyday use of knowledge about persuasion and influence has been an important topic, historically.

A second insight is that the 500th anniversary of the Renaissance is a more stimulating anniversary to celebrate in the year 2000 than the vague and distant Millennium. The Renaissance bloomed from roughly 1450-1525 AD, and peaked at about 1500 AD. When we think back 1000 years, little comes to mind. How much more interesting it is to frame the year 2000 as the 500th anniversary of the Renaissance. A period when the ethics and effects of social influence strategies drew scholarly examination, psychological representations invaded (Western) arts and culture, and a communication tool that would fundamentally alter the face of social influence (the printing press). These are things
My proposition is that skills related to marketplace activities are a fundamental aspect of human intellect. I will call this "marketplace intelligence." Research in diverse fields points toward this possibility.

If so, we who are now in the field of consumer research have a great vantage point on this "marketplace intelligence", and hence a great learning opportunity. We study a domain of human intelligence that is essential and important. We are the scholars most focused on and familiar with this topic by training and professional experiences. We have traditionally and formally studied consumers. And many, maybe most, of us also spend a lot of time in classrooms teaching marketing, hat is, talking with students and managers about the behavior of marketers. We have each observed and listened to thousands of laypeople expressing their personal beliefs about how to do marketing and about the psychology of consumers-that is, displaying to us lay knowledge about marketplace behavior, or marketplace intelligence. No other group of scholars has the special vantage point we have had on this by virtue of the things we traditionally study and what we teach.

Therefore, we moreso than other enclaves of researchers should be able to leverage the learning we've accumulated about "common sense" of the players on both sides of marketplace interactions to do useful theorizing about marketplace intelligence. And to capitalize on our continuing vantage point on lay consumers and lay marketers to sharpen our theorizing in the future.

What lines of research suggest that marketplace intelligence is a construct worth considering? And what might marketplace intelligence consist of as a domain of human expertise? My current thinking on this is suggested by my title for this presentation: "Marketplace Intelligence: Mindreading, Machiavellianism, and Magic."

Mindreading is the term researchers use to refer to a person's attempts to understand and infer what goes on in other people's minds and to make predictions about their behavior from these inferences.

Machiavellianism refers to skills in and strategies for social conduct. Sometimes it is used to mean manipulation of others for personal gain, decidedly against the other's self-interest. Other times it is used more broadly to reference the development and use of a portfolio of social strategies for effectively influencing others, without implying either a selfish or a cooperative intent.

Magic is the word we use for events we believe have occurred for which we have no explanation rooted in our current belief systems. Currently unexplainable events we perceive in the physical world or in the psychological world of our own or someone else's mind we temporarily label as "magic".

Relevant Research

One source on this topic is Howard Gardner's influential 1983 book *Frames of Mind*, and his subsequent writing. He proposes that there is not one monolithic kind of intelligence critical for a successful human life. Rather there is a spectrum of more-or-less domain specific intelligences. Gardner proposes that seven varieties, two of which pertain directly to marketplace skills. In addition to linguistic, musical, mathematical-logical, kinesthetic and spatial intelligences, Gardner proposes two "social psychological" intelligences. In a nutshell, intrapersonal intelligence is an ability to form an accurate valid mental model of oneself, and to use it for internal regulation and to operate effectively in everyday life. While interpersonal intelligence is the ability to understand other people's motivations, psychology, and social tactics.

A second line of recent work comes from developmental psychology. Work here has focused on the way in which infants, children and adolescents develop and refine a "theory of mind". We review some of this work as it pertains to persuasion and social influence in Fiestad and Wright, 1994, 1995. Another is the hypothesis advanced by evolutionary psychologists that human intelligence has evolved primarily to cope with the complexity of the social world, not the physical world. And that in this evolution the psychological mechanisms have become functionally specialized for solving particular classes of adaptive problems (see Buss 1996; Gigerenzer 1997; Wilson, Near and Miller 1996). Hence, the cognitive system and its psychological mechanisms are domain-specific, at least to enough of an extent to warrant treating them that way. The mechanisms are richly-structured in a content-specific way. Because social problems represent the most challenging general type of problem, the domains of import are defined by the central social tasks. Tasks often cited are mate selection, family relations, and cooperation. In addition to the domains of courting, parenting, and getting along, it seems quite likely that successfully doing marketplace exchanges as both buyer and seller is a central and vital enough task to be treated as a plausible intelligence domain.

In summary, I invite you to consider a marketplace intelligence that includes a mindreading module of processing devices and knowledge specific to the marketplace, a Machiavellian module of conditional social influence strategies specific to the marketplace, and a "practical magic" module (apologies to Alice Hoffman). The magic module includes inferential devices, heuristics and knowledge for implementing marketplace influence tactics in ways that will to others (i.e., consumers) seem magical, at least in the historical moment. And the countervailing devices, heuristics and knowledge for "seeing through" intended magic, the diversions, sensory illusions, logical-traps, and whatever that others execute to achieve marketplace influence.

If a marketplace intelligence of this sort seems plausible, is it also plausible that human culture offers tutoring on this to its children? Out of curiosity about this, I went back and looked for this in our American culture over the last century. This enabled me to invest a lot of time and money in collecting wonderful old magazines, children's books, and comic books, as materials for scholarly inquiry.

I can share some of what I found. Prompted by a serendipitous discovery of a full-length article on the psychology of selling in a 1906 *Saturday Evening Post* (with an N.C. Wyeth cover illustration), I poured through all issues of magazine in the first two decades of this century. To my surprise and delight, the topics of everyday selling and buying behaviors were the subject of scads of articles in this, the most popular of American magazines. When photocopied, the stack of articles is about three inches high!

Next I examined whether children's media of that era contained advertising. If so, it indicates that then, like now, children were faced with the task of learning to cope with advertisements, i.e., with the learning tasks that facilitate development of marketplace coping expertise. Note that the children of that era grew up to be the parents and teachers of my generation, and my generation likewise passes on market-related wisdom to our children, and so on. The children's magazines of the late 1800's and early 1900's, such as American Boy, *The Youth's Companion*, and *St. Nicholas* were in fact filled with advertising aimed at the children of the times. Indeed, issues of American Boy and Youth's Companion in the 1900's sometimes had multicolored ads for toothpastes and food products as their covers.

What about children's books? Lots of the adventure and mystery series for children, such as Nancy Drew, *The Radio Boys*, Tom Swift, Hardy Boys and Ruth Fielding, are ripe with allusions to persuasion strategies, con artists, and other social tactic stuff. Hence, these offer a learning laboratory pertinent to marketplace behaviors.
A favorite of mine were the animal books of Thornton Burgess, such as the Old Mother West Wind series, the Bedtime Storybook series, and the Green Meadow Series. These are books for kids five to eight in age. The chapters often began with a little poem or homily. It turns out that these often contained tutorials about strategies for social influence. For example, in Buster Bear’s Twins, one chapter begins, “Beware the stranger with a smile/Lest it hide a trickster’s guile.” Another begins with, “Don’t judge a stranger by his looks/Lest they may prove deceiving/The stupid-looking may be smart/In ways you’ll find beyond believing.” In Bower the Hound, we find chapters beginning with, “When a Coyote seems most honest, watch him most closely.” And “Of people who play tricks beware/Lest they may get you in a snare/You cannot trust them so watch out/Whenever one may be about.” In Old Granny Fox, Granny Fox herself shows her grandson Reddy how to attract the interest of a duck and lure it; the chapter begins, “The most curious thing in the world is curiosity.” And on and on.

The beautiful comic books of the 1940’s and 50’s that I grew up with were filled with page after page of clever advertising for kids to learn to deal with. Even the superhero comics that stayed pure throughout the 1940’s, such as The Lone Ranger and Roy Rogers, gradually introduced ads for products other than the superhero promotional premiums they had always featured. In the 1950’s and 1960’s, Mad magazine made the mockery of advertising tactics, promotional deals, celebrity endorsements and so forth its stock and trade. Clever and savage takeoffs on the ads of well-known companies were transparently disguised, and provided that generation’s teenagers with effective education about marketplace tactics.

So, it has indeed been the case that American children of the last, say, 125 years have had ample opportunity and necessity to develop marketing savvy. We suspect such has always been the case. The updating and diffusion of folk knowledge about persuasion and marketplace tactics has been commonplace in both the argument that the marketplace task domain is vital and challenging, and could evoke a rich knowledge domain tailored to it.

EDUCATION ON MARKETPLACE TASKS AND TACTICS

The theme I have presented here has an implication beyond the research opportunity I have emphasized so far. We cannot highlight marketplace knowledge and marketplace intelligence without also being drawn to education about marketplace tasks and tactics. Relatively few members of the consumer research community have invested in either studying how to educate youngsters about marketplace tactics or in constructing effective tutoring programs and materials to get this done. We have almost unilaterally serviced the “marketer” side of the marketplace game.

Perhaps we should consider how history will view this. Machiavelli’s work is viewed as mean-spirited. Why? Reading what he actually says reveals that he offers a fairly balanced and not wholly mean-spirited discussion of effective tactics. But he frames it only in terms of how the already-powerful in society, in his case the nobility, can effectively influence the less powerful, the everyday folks. Had he framed his work differently, taking say the perspective of an individual trying to cope with and influence others with equal or more resources, or, say, that of a mother trying to effectively influence her children, history’s view of him might have been more favorable.

It seems time for members of the consumer research community to face our responsibility to, and opportunity to, educate all segments of the population about the marketplace, not only the marketers whom we have traditionally serviced.

REFERENCES


