How a Marketing Doctrine Overcomes the Flexibility Vs Consistency Conundrum

Key Concept
Diversified or decentralized firm face a conundrum: How do you ensure that marketing decisions are consistent across the entire company without undermining the flexibility required to tailor marketing decisions to local circumstances? The answer: A marketing doctrine based on unique principles that guide without dictating.

Idea Summary
If you're a national or international company with marketing authority and practices spread across various locations, or if you have a diversified group of products or businesses that call for different marketing approaches, how can you maintain a consistent marketing strategy that is aligned with the company's overall priorities while still giving local functions the flexibility to design their own strategies?

After conducting and analysing a series of in-depth interviews with three sets of executives involved in marketing (for a total of 35 executives across a variety of industries), three academics offer a solution to the consistency/flexibility conundrum: the concept of the marketing doctrine.

As defined by professors Goutam Challagalla of the Georgia Institute of Technology, Brian Murtha of the University of Kentucky and Bernard Jaworski of Claremont Graduate University, a marketing doctrine is a guiding document based on a set of marketing principles unique to the company.

The most effective marketing doctrines are built on guiding principles that:

- Are distilled from repeated experiences of the firm. These experiences reveal what works (and doesn't work) and what is important for the success of the company.
- Provide firm-wide guidance. They must be understood and applied by any function involved in marketing-related activities.
- Help the company focus on its most critical market-facing choices.
its activities and choices in the marketplace. A behemoth such as Apple, Inc., for example, only follows seven marketing principles, all of them directly connected to the market. Among its principles are “focus on few products and models”; “put products before profits — push for perfection in products”; and “take end-to-end responsibility for the user experience.”

A marketing doctrine’s unique principles can be identified by reviewing the company’s marketing history, looking for events and decisions that offer both positive and negative core lessons.

When developing a marketing doctrine, companies must pay close attention to the flexibility, simplicity and explicitness offered by the chosen principles. For example, one company might have a positioning principle as follows: “A brand must own one position across all markets.” Another company’s positioning principle might be the following: “Brand positioning must be consistent across regions.” The first example is a rule related to positioning, while the second more of a standard. Standards, allowing more flexibility, are more effective than rules in a marketing doctrine.

**Business Application**

A marketing doctrine built on a company’s unique principles, themselves distilled from the company’s past experiences, will go a long ways toward helping companies balance consistency and flexibility in their marketing decisions.

In addition to these benefits, a well-designed marketing doctrine can also:

- **Enhance corporate creativity.** The guiding principles can help creatives in the company focus their attention on certain goals or paths, rather than staring at a blank page and looking for inspiration.

- **Reduce marketing impulsivity.** Too many marketing programs are reactive or impulsive, launching a multitude of scattered marketing initiatives without focus or discipline. A marketing doctrine with guiding principles can keep this impulsivity in check.

- **Increase the perceived value of marketing.** The clear alignment of a marketing doctrine with a company’s strategic priorities helps clarify the role that marketing plays in the success of the company.

- **Increase the performance of the company.** Aligned priorities, consistent decision-making and less marketing impulsivity can only help to improve overall results.

A marketing doctrine is especially valuable for companies that are diversified or decentralized. However, external factors can also increase the impact of a marketing doctrine. Companies buffeted by the competition may react impulsively, blindly following the competition or too hastily leaving behind time-tested marketing practices. A solid marketing doctrine will prevent these mistakes. Clear marketing principles will also help stabilize a company in a state of structural flux. If there is significant change in personnel or significant movement among business units, for example, guiding principles act as a unifying force.
The one cautionary note about marketing doctrines concern companies struggling with significant market turbulence. In this case, seeking the comfort and stability of the marketing doctrine may be ill advised. Sometimes, there is no choice: the old guiding principles no longer work and must be replaced.

As with any methodology or concept, a marketing doctrine is still only a tool. Companies must have realistic expectations about its effectiveness in different situations. Most importantly, a marketing doctrine does not, and is never intended to, replace old-fashioned and incontrovertible human thinking.

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References


Further Reading and Relevant Resources

Goutam Challagalla's profile at IMD Business School
Brian Murtha's profile at University of Kentucky Gatton College of Business and Economics
Bernard Jaworski's profile at Claremont Graduate University Drucker School of Management
IMD Business School's Executive Education profile at IEDP

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