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## Do ethics have a place in marketing? An overview of the last 20 years

### Abstract

The objective of this article is to produce a report of the state of ethical considerations in the discipline of marketing over the last 20 years by way of a descriptive meta-analysis of the main scientific journals specialized in marketing in order to contribute to the advancement of knowledge in this field. The results show a discernible progression in the volume of research published, especially since 1995. With 154 mainly “conceptual” articles documented, predominantly from six journals, it is evident that further investigation is still needed for the field of ethical marketing to grow as a separate discipline in management studies.

**Keywords:** marketing, ethics, meta-analysis.

### Introduction

The last two decades have seen a marked increase in the interest given to the field of business ethics, particularly, marketing ethics (Batory, Neese and Batory, 2005). This basic trend (driven by a number of successive effects) illustrates the evolution of collective representations with regard to the role of business in society (Mercier, 2004). In addition, of the many areas of management, marketing is undoubtedly one of the most controversial when it comes to the question of ethics (Nantel and Weeks, 1991). In fact, marketing is often viewed by the public as the activity the most affected by ethical abuses and scandals insofar as marketing is the main interface between the organization and its environment (Dubinsky and Loken, 1989). Nevertheless, the fact that marketing risks being confronted with ethical problems does not mean that it ought not to be moral. The true foundations of marketing and the principles that guide managers, marketing itself possesses, by definition, all characteristics of ethical behavior (Helfer, 2003). However, as Dussart and Nantel (2007) recently mentioned, ecological and environmental concerns are one of two important trends – with the evolution of the Web – in marketing for the twentieth century.

Despite the growing interest in business ethics in marketing, it is difficult to judge its recognition in the discipline since no true meta-analysis exists in the field. Therefore, it seems prudent to proceed with a review of the research addressing ethics in marketing, so as to position the discipline of marketing in relation to others in their ethics integration. Borkowski et al. (1998) demonstrate that between 1965 and 1974, only 1% of 261 studies documented dealing with ethics addressed the topic of management. Between 1975 and 1984, 6% of 835 studies pertained to the field of management. Finally, between 1985 and 1994, 11% of 2067 studies inventoried married ethics with management.

From this fact, the aim of this article was to better understand the place and the role played by ethics in marketing field. Thus, an analysis of the literature taking into account ethical consideration in the discipline of marketing from 1985 to present was done. This research could bring about important contributions, insofar as since the study done by Tsalikis and Fritzsche (1989), nothing in the literature allows an identification of ethical trends in marketing. To achieve this goal, a descriptive meta-analysis was performed using 19 scientific marketing journals (three are francophone) classified as A, B, C and D. First, the article provides a report on the concept of business ethics and the recognition of the field of ethics in the discipline of marketing. Secondly, the methodological section presents the specificities of a descriptive meta-analysis, the methodology used to select articles as well as the chosen analysis framework. Finally, the findings are set forth and discussed.

### 1. Theoretical and conceptual background: from business ethics to ethics in marketing

**1.1. Business ethics concept.** *Business ethics* as a concept appeared in the 1920s. Since that time, articles addressing the topic have become more and more numerous. Three events marked the growth of business ethics in literature:

- ◆ the literature review done by Murphy and Laczniak (1981) of 100 articles dealing with business ethics and marketing;
- ◆ *The Bibliography of Business Ethics* by Jones and Troy (1982);
- ◆ the creation of two journals dealing with this subject, namely, *The Journal of Business Ethics* and *The Business and Professional Ethics Journal* (Tsalikis and Fritzsche, 1989).

At once an ideology, a research trend and a tool for strategic and managerial administration, business ethics continues to grow in management sciences literature (Durif, 2006).

Concretely, business ethics studies the moral justification of the economic system (that of free enterprise), the activities conducted within the limits of this system and the individuals and their behaviors at the time of economic and commercial dealings (De George, 1987). According to Beschoner (2006), two dimensions constitute the theory of business ethics: justification and application. Justification is the fact of explaining the nature of the rules and principles on which an organization stands. Application is a matter of implementing the ideologies lauded by the organization. However, the concept of *business ethics*, originally from ideological and philosophical history, comprises variations of relatively different contents according to the interpretations. Moreover, Pesqueux and Biefnot (2002) mention that it is difficult to analyze this concept without dealing with the concept of ethics itself. Nevertheless, different theoretical advancements born from the multiplication of research in the field have allowed administrators to broaden their competencies in order to better grasp the issues at the time of decision-making (Lauriol and Mesure, 2002). In practice, many organizations realize that if they want to succeed, they must gain the respect and trust of their clients (Ballet and De Bry, 2001). Businesses are thus pushed to improve their business practices by putting emphasis on ethical and responsible conduct. The manner in which these behaviors are evaluated has changed with an increase of ethical demands, in particular on the part of management (Duhamel and Mouehli, 2001).

Business ethics aim to establish the best ways to resolve conflicts by offering ways that allow for good decisions to be made (Morris, 2004). Duhamel and Mouehli (2001) demonstrate that ethics do not consist of an ensemble of moral values that should be opposed to economic values. The literature shows neither consensus nor unanimity concerning the content, the basic theories or the societal and organizational implications (Lauriol and Mesure, 2003; Bélanger and Lévesque, 2000). The issue resides in the skilled exercise of transposing an individual ideological concept onto the business world (Mercier, 2004).

**1.2. Ethics in marketing.** Marketing is often considered as the managerial practice furthest from the most commonly accepted ethical principles (Helfer, 2003). This negative image comes from facts reported by the media on the illegal or morally questionable marketing conduct which is, moreover, always absorbed in mercantilism (Ballet and De Bry, 2001). This is mainly due to the fact that this discipline is the primary interface with the consumer (Dalla Costa, 2006). Following the rapid increase of studies devoted to business ethics (Tsalikis and

Fritzsche, 1989), marketing as a discipline was not exempt. In fact, according to Batory, Neese and Batory (2005), the 1990s saw research efforts focused on theoretical models in ethical marketing (Hunt and Vitell, 1992), on practical research (Singhapakdi and Vitell, 1993) and on marketing norms (Vitell, Rallapalli and Singhapakdi, 1993). In addition, the field of ethics in marketing was recently criticized and examined on the basis of Gaski's work (1999).

From a more pragmatic approach, Andrews (1989) brings up the fact that the role of management and administration is fundamental, because they are the key players in the company and they choose the behavior to adopt. In addition, according to Camenisch (1991), in a strategic plan, the decision made is essential and therefore concerns the ethical position that the organization wishes to adopt in relation to the minimum obligations. This ethical position constitutes more of a strategic factor than a determining factor. In fact, the ethical position defines in what way the organization expects to exceed the minimal obligations that bind it to its stakeholders and to society as a whole (Johnson, Scholes and Fréry, 2005). With this consciousness-raising, administrators must understand that respect toward stakeholders is not an obstacle in the company's quest for profitability (Ballet and De Bry, 2001). Ethics positions itself as an area of tension between the interests of the company, general interest and the interest of others (Mercier, 2004).

## 2. Methodology

The objective of this article was to review some areas of ethical consideration in the discipline from 1985 to present using a descriptive meta-analysis of the principal scientific journals specialized in marketing. This type of meta-analysis establishes a descriptive picture of a specific domain of literary research (Hunter and Schmidt, 2004). It provides a general picture, large and inclusive of a specific literature review. As well, this method of meta-analysis does not seek to analyze or correct errors in the research results, but to simply take stock of the specific sites of a research area (Glass, 1977). As mentioned by Durif, Paulin and Bergeron (2008):

*"The process of meta-analysis helps to synthesize information and furnishes other avenues for reflection future and future studies. Thus, one may uncover new knowledge not identifiable through individual research projects. Meta-analysis has been a useful tool to underline the difficulty in solving a research question with one empirical study and it has been indispensable to develop a constructive theory".*

**2.1. Research method.** As a way to choose academic journals specialized in marketing to be included in the present meta-analysis, the list put forward by the *Association Française du Marketing* (AFM, 2003) was used. This list was chosen as it is well respected in the academic field and by practitioners. From this suggested list, the choice of journals was made from all journals in categories A and B that is 16 journals. The main rationale for this procedure was to include all the articles that had a well-recognized impact in the field in the past twenty years. To have a more international and European perspective and to avoid being exclusionary, European and francophone journals were added (*Décision Marketing*, *European Journal of Marketing* and *Revue Française de Marketing*). For the data collection in this meta-analysis, the Proquest ABI/INFORM Global search engine was used. “ABI/INFORM Global™ is one of the most comprehensive business databases on the market. It includes in-depth coverage for over 2,890 publications, with more than 1,920 available in full text. ABI/INFORM Global offers the latest business and financial information for researchers at all levels. With ABI/INFORM Global, users can find out about business conditions, management techniques, business trends, management practice and theory, corporate strategy and tactics, and competitive landscape”<sup>1</sup>.

**2.2. Control.** Each of the 19 journals, every edition, from 1985 to present, was scanned by three judges using the Proquest ABI INFORM search engine. As suggested by Miles and Huberman (2003) a starting list of keywords was established by the members of the research team. This list was the result of the examination of the literature review on the business ethics field and the recommendation of two experts. Those keywords were: *ethics, social responsibility, business ethics, equitable marketing, sustainable development, social marketing, biological marketing, environmental marketing, responsible marketing, ethics code, moral, eco-marketing and stakeholders*. The title of the article was the unit of analysis. To increase the validity of the process, the selection was independently made by three judges. After the analysis of the references selected by each judge, an agreement of 90% was observed. In total, 154 articles were selected (see Table 1 in Appendix).

### 3. Key results

Since 1985, the number of articles addressing the topic of ethics in marketing in academic journals has increased, in 2004 and 2005 particularly. Prior to 1990, less than five articles on the subject were pub-

lished per year. Since then, interest in the subject has evolved and rare are the years that the number of articles is less than five (1991, 1998, 2001). The peak came in 2005 with a total of 25 publications.

The evolution of the historic occurrence of articles contingent on journals is equally interesting information. It is possible to state that the journal that has contributed the most to the theme of ethics in marketing, in terms of volume of publications, is the *European Journal of Marketing* (39 articles since 1985), followed by *The Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management* with 26 articles, and the *Journal of Marketing* as well as the *Journal of Advertising*, both with 20 articles. Other journals have also published several studies, however on a much less prevalent level.

In 1985, the *Journal of Marketing* was the only journal in marketing to publish an article discussing ethics. The following year, the *Journal of Marketing* published another article on the same subject as did *The Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management* and *International Journal of Research in Marketing*. These three journals were the first to address the theme of ethics in the discipline of marketing. Since 2000, each journal has edited at least one article on the subject. In 2005, *The Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management* published an unequaled 15 articles in a single year. The *Revue Française du Marketing* also had an exceptional year in 2004 with nine publications – special editions for both journals.

In total, since 1985, of the 150 articles published where information was available, 79 studies are conceptual whereas 71 are empirical. It is possible to see that there is a lot of variation from year to year and that no apparent trend is emerging. Furthermore, the higher number of conceptual studies is relatively important (79 vs. 71) that could suggest a lack of investigation into the field of ethics in marketing.

It is equally possible to observe that the majority of empirical research was published in category B (42/71) and C (17/71) journals. In terms of the distribution of conceptual research, there is not a true trend, even if the number of articles is equally high in journals of type B (26/79) and C (26/79). Nonetheless, the articles related to ethics are more conceptual than empirical in nature in journals C and D (40 vs. 18). Of the 18 articles listed in category D journals, only one is empirical.

The thematic profile of the articles by journal category was also examined. As well, *ethics* in its general sense was the most addressed topic (68/154), in particular in category A and B journals. In the category C journals, *stakeholder* themes were predomi-

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.proquest.com/products\\_pq/descriptions/abi\\_inform.shtml](http://www.proquest.com/products_pq/descriptions/abi_inform.shtml) (2008/09/28).

nant whereas in category D journals, *social responsibility* was prevalent. Apart from *ethics* in general, five other themes stood out in nearly the same order of importance: *stakeholders* (18/154), *social responsibility* (15/154), *business ethics* (15/154), *social marketing* (15/154) and *environmental marketing* (11/154). It is interesting to note that of the themes like *responsible marketing*, *equitable marketing*, *eco-marketing*, *ethics codification*, *morality*, and *biological marketing* were almost never discussed in academic journals specialized in marketing and this, despite the importance that such topics exhibit within this domain.

Note that anglophone journals privilege themes of *ethics* in a broad sense, the *stakeholders*, *business ethics* as well as *social marketing*. On the other hand, themes of *social responsibility*, *sustainable development* and *ethics* in a broad sense were prevalent in francophone journals. It is necessary to mention that in the articles taken from francophone journals, few thematics are discussed, whether they be *ethics* in general (4), *social responsibility* (6), *environmental marketing* (1) or *sustainable development* (4).

Of the 71 empirical studies in this meta-analysis, it was possible to classify only 60 articles given the lack of information, particularly in the articles where we were using only the “abstracts”. Finally, the majority of the quantitative studies were published in category B journals (27/41), mainly North American publications. With regard to qualitative research, data were most present in category C journals (7/13), mainly European publications.

Regarding the detailed methodology and the empirical articles of this meta-analysis, we note that the majority of studies took place in the United States (39/61 where data were available) and almost all in a tertiary sector (54/68). The average size of the sample is relatively high (531) and administrators were most investigated (12/57). In terms of the method of analysis, it is basically a matter of ANOVA (12) and MANOVA (11) analyses.

#### 4. Discussion

This meta-analysis allowed for the identification and classification of 154 articles addressing ethics in 13 academic journals specialized in marketing, of categories A, B, C and D (originally an investigation of 19 journals) and this, over a period of more than 20 years (1985 to present). It is evident that in the last two decades, themes linked to ethics have not gained particularly strong interest in marketing, as 154 total articles is a relatively weak number. Moreover, nearly all of the articles (134/154) were published in only six journals: *European Journal of Marketing* (C): 39; *Journal of Personnel Selling and*

*Sales Management* (B): 26; *Journal of Marketing* (A): 20; *Journal of Advertising* (B): 20; *Revue Française de Marketing* (D): 15; and *Psychology and Marketing* (B): 14. This number is rather surprising given the importance and popularity of business ethics which has now become a true societal phenomenon (Sénécal and Nantel, 2007; Mercier, 2004; Pasquero, 2000). In addition, the majority of the identified articles in this meta-analysis are conceptual (52%), which seems to indicate a lack of investigation into these notions in the marketing discipline. With regard to the chosen thematics of this research, it is a matter, in order of importance, of *ethics* in the larger sense, the *stakeholders*, *social responsibility*, *business ethics*, *social marketing* and *environmental marketing*. All the same, since 1995 there seems to have been some increase in the volume of publications in academic journals specialized in marketing addressing ethics. Thus, the results of this study underline that numerous investigations are still needed so that ethics in the field of marketing becomes a discipline unto itself.

#### Conclusion

Ethical marketing stays, a field is still in the middle of expanding, seeking its conceptual and ideological bases. The present meta-analysis positions itself as a first step toward the advancement of knowledge in the field of ethics in marketing. A large portrait of the recognition of ethics in the main journals specialized in marketing has been drawn, which, at present, is a “first” in research literature. This meta-analysis could serve as a reference tool and as a point of departure for further research into the place of ethics in the discipline of marketing.

Some limitations of this research, however, should be mentioned. For example, the selection of only 19 academic journals specialized in marketing as our research base was made for reasons of timing and budget. It would be interesting to include the ensemble of mentioned journals in diverse academic areas. With regard to the process of selecting articles, it is evident that the fact of sorting research by title and by keywords is questionable, it is important to analyze each article in its entirety in order to achieve superior validity. Moreover, it would be pertinent to use other meta-analytical techniques in a way that identifies errors in the studies dealing with this area of investigation (Hunter and Schmidt, 2004). The objective of this research, however, was strictly to offer an account of areas and a general profile of studies having dealt with the thematic of ethics in marketing. A follow-up of the analysis of these 154 articles remains, notably on the subject of the studied thematic.

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## Appendix

Table 1. List of the articles selected in meta-analysis

Number	Title	Authors	Review	Date
1	Comments on competitive responsiveness	Steven M. Shugan	Marketing Science	2005
2	Ethical notions about the general application of marketing techniques. Derived from Jurgen Habermas' Theory of Human Action	Van Toledo, K.	International Journal of Research in Marketing	1986
3	External moderation of associations among stakeholder orientations and company performance	Greenley, Gordon E., Foxall, Gordon R.	International Journal of Research in Marketing	1998
4	Corporate social responsibility and consumers' attributions and brand evaluations in a product-harm crisis	Jill Klein, Niraj Dawar	International Journal of Research in Marketing	2005
5	Corporate social responsibility, customer satisfaction, and market value	Xueming Luo, C.B. Bhattacharya	Journal of Marketing	2006
6	The effect of corporate social responsibility on customer donations to corporate-supported nonprofits	Donald R. Lichtenstein, Minette E. Drumwright, Bridgette M. Braig	Journal of Marketing	2004
7	Social contracts and marketing ethics	Thomas W. Dunfee, N. Craig Smith, William T. Ross Jr.	Journal of Marketing	1999
8	The role of marketing actions with a social dimension: Appeals to the institutional environment	Jay M. Handelman, Stephen J. Arnold	Journal of Marketing	1999
9	Marketing's contributions to society	William L. Wilkie, Elizabeth S. Moore	Journal of Marketing	1999
10	Ethics and target marketing: The role of product harm and consumer vulnerability	N. Craig Smith, Elizabeth Cooper-Martin	Journal of Marketing	1997
11	Enviropreneurial marketing strategy: The emergence of corporate environmentalism as market strategy	Menon, Anil, Menon, Ajay	Journal of Marketing	1997
12	Company advertising with a social dimension: The role of noneconomic criteria	Drumwright, Minette E.	Journal of Marketing	1996
13	Book reviews: do the right thing: ethics and marketing in a world gone wrong	Fraedrich, John P.	Journal of Marketing	1996
14	Exonerating unethical marketing executive behaviors: A diagnostic framework	Mascarenhas, Oswald A.J.	Journal of Marketing	1995
15	Socially responsible organizational buying: environmental concern as a noneconomic buying criterion	Drumwright, Minette E.	Journal of Marketing	1994
16	Book reviews: Ethical marketing decisions: the higher road	N/D	Journal of Marketing	1994
17	Ethical and legal foundations of relational marketing exchanges	Gundlach, Gregory T., Murphy, Patrick E.	Journal of Marketing	1993
18	Book reviews: The romantic ethic and the spirit of modern consumerism	Arnould, Eric J.	Journal of Marketing	1989
19	Corporate ethical values and organizational commitment in marketing	Hunt, Shelby D., Wood, Van R., Chonko, Lawrence B.	Journal of Marketing	1989
20	Supervising unethical salesforce behavior	Bellizzi, Joseph A., Hite, Robert E.	Journal of Marketing	1989
21	The effectiveness of marketing policy boycotts: environmental opposition to marketing	Garrett, Dennis, E.	Journal of Marketing	1987
22	Social responsibility, ethics, and marketing strategy: closing the gap between concept and application	Robin, Donald P., Reidenbach, R. Eric	Journal of Marketing	1987
23	Marketing ethics – guidelines for managers	Westing, J.H.	Journal of Marketing	1986
24	A contingency framework for understanding ethical decision making in marketing	Ferrell, O.C., Gresham, Larry G.	Journal of Marketing	1985
25	Lien entre climat éthique et comportement éthique du vendeur: rôle déterminant du management commercial. Une application au domaine industriel	Laure Lavorata	Recherche et Applications en Marketing	2005
26	La consommation socialement responsable : proposition et validation d'un cadre conceptuel intégrateur	Agnès François-Lecompte	Recherche et Applications en Marketing	2006
27	La légitimité d'une communication sociétale : le rôle de l'annonceur	Sonia Capelli	Recherche et Applications en Marketing	2005
28	Évolution de l'épistémologie économique et sociale: proposition d'un cadre de morale, de déontologie, d'éthique et de responsabilité pour le marketer	Michelle Bergadaà	Recherche et Applications en Marketing	2005
29	Contextual bias in ethical judgment of marketing practices	James J. Kellaris, Robert F. Dahlstrom, Brett A. Boyle	Psychology & Marketing	1996
30	Exploring the psychological foundations of ethical positions in marketing	Roger P. McIntyre Margaret M. Capen, Ann P. Minton	Psychology & Marketing	1995
31	Ambush marketing: The ethical issues	O. Sullivan, Paul, Murphy, Patrick	Psychology & Marketing	1998
32	Deception in marketing research: Ethical, methodological, and disciplinary implications	Allan J. Kimmel, N. Craig Smith	Psychology & Marketing	2001
33	Voluntary simplicity and the ethics of consumption	Deirdre Shaw, Terry Newholm	Psychology & Marketing	2002
34	Toward an ethical framework for political marketing	Nicholas O'Shaughnessy	Psychology & Marketing	2002
35	Ethical ideologies: Efficient assessment and influence on ethical judgments of marketing practices	Susan Bardi Kleiser, Eugene Sivadas, James J. Kellaris, Robert F. Dahlstrom	Psychology & Marketing	2003

36	Fear appeals in social marketing: Strategic and ethical reasons for concern	Gerard Hastings, Martine Stead, John Webb	Psychology & Marketing	2004
37	How green-claim strength and country disposition affect product evaluation and company image	Lalita A. Manrai, Ajay K Manrai, Dana-Nicoleta Lascu, John K Ryans Jr.	Psychology & Marketing	1997
38	Environmental consumerism: A process of children's socialization and families' resocialization	Debbie Easterling, Shirley Miller, Nanci Weinberger	Psychology & Marketing	1995
39	Woman to women: social marketing an idea to the New World; abstract	Laurie Holden, Alfred C. Holden	Psychology & Marketing	1998
40	Attitudes and recycling: Does the measurement of affect enhance behavioral prediction?	Stephen M. Smith, Curtis P. Hagtvedt, Richard E. Petty	Psychology & Marketing	1994
41	Recycling as a marketing problem: A framework for strategy development	N/D	Psychology & Marketing	1994
42	Disciplining top-performing unethical salespeople: examining the moderating effects of ethical seriousness and consequences	Joseph A. Bellizzi	Psychology & Marketing	2006
43	Ethics and personal selling: Death of a salesman as an ethical primer	Caywood, Clarke L., Laczniak, Gene R.	The Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management	1986
44	Sales management students vs. business practitioners: ethical dilemmas and perceptual differences	Tansey, Richard, Brown, Gene, Hyman, Michael R., Dawson, Lyndon E. Jr.	The Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management	1991
45	Analyzing the ethical decision making of sales professionals	Singhapakdi, Anusorn, Vitell, Scott J.	The Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management	1991
46	Ethical climate, organizational commitment, and indebtedness among purchasing executives	Kelley, Scott W., Dorsch, Michael J.	The Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management	1991
47	Ethical dilemmas faced in the selling of complex services: significant others and competitive pressures	Hoffman, K. Douglas, Howe, Vince, Hardigree, Donald W.	The Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management	1991
48	Gender and sales ethics: Are women penalized less severely	N/D	The Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management	1991
49	The relevance of ethical salesperson behavior on relationship quality: The pharmaceutical industry	Lagace, Rosemary R., Dahlstrom, Robert, Gassenheimer, Jule B.	The Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management	1991
50	Professionalism and ethical standards among salespeople in a deregulated environment: A case study of the trucking industry	Schneider, Kenneth C., Johnson, James C.	The Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management	1992
51	Will feminization change the ethics of the sales profession?	Dawson, Leslie M.	The Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management	1992
52	Marketing ethics: Sales professionals versus other marketing professionals	Singhapakdi, Anusorn, Vitell, Scott J.	The Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management	1992
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