

A NEW APPROACH TO DEVELOPING TURNAROUND MARKETING STRATEGIES

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ABSTRACT

Micro-marketing and macro-marketing problems are often treated as “ordinary” problems that are deterministic and having a closed-solution from a bounded set of solution alternatives. However, quite a few marketing problems are “extraordinary” and “wicked” since they tend to arise from non-deterministic, socially complex and economically turbulent environments. We argue here that many marketing problems a) are “wicked”, b) to begin with, one can merely tame (rather than totally resolve) them using distributive and corrective justice principles, and c) over time with each successive resolutions, organizations can learn paths toward more complete resolutions. We discuss marketing and strategic implications of this novel approach to “wicked” marketing problems

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INTRODUCTION

Ordinary marketing problems (e.g., ineffective promotional marketing, declining sales, eroding market share, or shrinking customer bases) are definable and consensual. In solving the ordinary problems, managers generally follow six linear steps: a) define the problem, b) generate a number of solution alternatives, c) specify criteria by which solutions can be evaluated, d) apply criteria for evaluating solutions and select the one to be implemented, e) implement the solution, and f) seek feedback on the effectiveness of the solution and its implementation.

Rittel, & Webber,(1973) first proposed the notion of “wicked” problems as opposed to ordinary tame problems. These are problems that cannot be resolved with traditional analytical approaches. Ackoff, (1974) called such problems a “mess” and Horn, (2001) called them a “social mess.”

CLASSIFYING PROBLEMS

Rittel, & Webber, (1973)visualized three basic types of problems:

- **Simple:** Both the problems and the solutions are known or definable. Tame problems allow us to work “inside the box.” Problem-solution is a user-centered design.
- **Complex:** The problem is definable but not its solution space. The major task is to do some planning such that your major stakeholders buy into its goals. Problem-solution is a multiple-user-centered design of planning, agreement and deliberation.
- **Wicked:** Both problems and their solutions are not definable. Stakeholders have multiple viewpoints about the wicked problems, their goals, and their consequences. There may not be any agreement on the problem, its nature, its goals, or its consequences among its multiple stakeholders. Wicked problems force us to work “outside the box.”

Treating wicked problems as tame misdirects energy and resources resulting in ineffective solutions, and often such solutions create more difficulty. Wicked problems are ill-defined, ambiguous and associated with strong moral, political and professional issues. They are also often triggered by structures of social injustice, inequity and violence. Since they are strongly

stakeholder-dependent, there is often little consensus about what the problem is and its solution (Ritchey, 2005).

WICKED MARKETING PROBLEMS

Many product design issues involve overcoming wicked problems. Marketing often thrives on innovations and most innovations involve design considerations, and hence, are wicked problems. Firms generate many patents simply to lock them down so they can prevent other companies from pursuing them. Some companies even use the income from lawsuits and licensing from those (unused) patents as a main source of revenue. At the same time, we have a shortage of innovations in areas of housing, education, transport, energy and ecology. All these and other cross-functionality aspects of innovations make them wicked problems.

For instance, P&G owns over 30,000 patents to their name, but only 10 percent of them generally show up in its product lines. Of course, not all innovations have to be directed to market-ready products; they could also be used to launch brilliant marketing programs that strengthen brand equity of existing flagship brands, or to develop and retain customer loyalty. Thus, wicked problems arise when an organization must deal with something new, with change, and when multiple stakeholders have different ideas about how the change should take place. If the requirements for a process of change are volatile, if constraints keep changing, if stakeholders disagree, and if the target of change keeps moving, then in all likelihood, we are dealing with a wicked marketing problem.

CHARACTERIZING WICKEDNESS

What makes a problem wicked? Rittel, & Webber, (1973: 161-169) believe that wicked problems have ten characteristics:

1. **Wicked problems are *not easily definable*. One cannot easily formulate wicked problems with a well-defined statement. You do not understand the problem until you have developed a solution**
2. **Wicked problems have *no stopping rules*. The search for problem formulation and resolution never stops. This is also because the wicked problem is continually**

evolving and mutating. There are no optimal solutions for wicked problems. There are only “satisficing” solutions – you stop when you have a solution that is “good enough” (Herbert Simon 1969).

3. *Solutions to wicked problems are not objectively true or false, right or wrong, but only judgmentally better or worse, good enough or not. Different stakeholders judge different solutions as simply better or worse from their viewpoints.*
4. *There is no immediate and no ultimate test of a solution to a wicked problem. Solutions to wicked problems generate unexpected consequences over time, making it difficult to measure their effectiveness.*
5. *Every solution to a wicked problem is a “one shot operation” as it is not possible to discover a solution to a wicked problem by trial and error. Every solution you try is expensive and has lasting foreseen and unintended consequences that may spawn new wicked problems. For example, the real effectiveness of a new car design can be measured only after its introduction.*
6. *Wicked problems do not have an exhaustively describable set of potential solutions. It is difficult to know whether all possible resolutions to wicked problems have been identified and assessed.*
7. *Every wicked problem is essentially unique and novel. Often, some particulars of the problem override their commonalities.*
8. *Every wicked problem is a symptom of another wicked problem with which it is entwined. They involve a good deal of mutual and circular causality, and the problem must be considered at many causal levels.*
9. *The cause of a wicked problem can be explained in numerous ways. The choice of explanation determines the nature of the problem’s solution. That is, a wicked problem involves many stakeholders who have different ideas on tracing its causes.*
10. *Executives confronted with a wicked problem have no right to be wrong; they are liable to the consequences of the actions they take to resolve the wicked problems.*

Note that even if a problem does not meet all the criteria of a wicked problem, we can still classify it as an “ill-structured” problem (Chase, & Simon, 1973) that is often characterized by a

lack of agreement on problem statement, solution paths, and solutions that are plagued with high degree of uncertainty. The key characteristic of all wicked problems is that they involve people, multiple stakeholders, personal goals and objectives that may be mutually conflicting (Becker, 2007).

By definition, wicked problems cannot be solved, but can be “managed” or “resolved” to a certain extent. The whole process of managing wicked problems is dynamic. This iterative or non-linear process of problem formulation is often opportunity driven (Conklin, 2006).

Simple problems, on the other hand, have well defined and stable problem statements; they have limited solution spaces within which one can explore and find a definite final solutions, and therefore, stopping points to signal the solution. They have solutions that can be objectively assessed as right or wrong, good or bad. Simple problems have solutions that can be easily tried and abandoned without serious unintended consequences.

RECOGNIZING WICKEDNESS

Many factors generate wicked problems, but the point is not to determine if a problem is wicked or not, but to have a sense of what contributes to the wickedness of a problem. The sources of a problem’s wickedness are many (Conklin, 2006). Reckless corporate cost-containment methods create also wicked problems (e.g., downsizing, plant shut downs, plant relocations, massive layoffs, offshore outsourcing, sweatshops, child labor, forcing suppliers to lower prices beyond their breakeven point, and the like).

Increasingly, today’s CEOs as strategists face wicked problems for which they are ill-equipped (Camillus, 2008). Wicked problems arise amidst market uncertainty and turbulence, excessive shareholder pressure, credit crunch, and other unprecedented challenges. They involve many stakeholders with different values and priorities. Convergence of industries can also create wicked problems. For instance, computer industry and the internet have changed the postal mail,

music, sports entertainment, film, TV, radio, telephone and intellectual property industries radically.

Current Wicked Problems in Marketing

There are many simple and tame problems in marketing, but also a growing number of wicked problems. Many simple or complex problems of the past have since grown to be wicked. Examples of this include healthcare, car safety, drug safety, air pollution, consumer and merchant fraud, as well as the marketing of casinos, cigarettes and pornography. In what follows, we present a set of marketing problems that have become wicked with advances in digitization, globalization, outsourcing and other advances in the business world.

WAL-MART'S WICKED PROBLEMS

However, even Wal-Mart is currently facing a “wicked” problem. As it tries to grow faster, its numerous stakeholders are watching it nervously. Wal-Mart is experiencing slower growth rates in the U.S. Wal-Mart's practices such as low wages, lack of adequate employee benefits, “ignoring” inner-city consumers, and sourcing from sweatshops are being criticized. There is increasing pressure for action to resolve the above issues.

Table 1 summarizes the above retailing problems and establishes the degree of their wickedness using Rittel, & Webber, (1973) ten criteria. As is clear from *Table 1*, each problem has its own intensity of wickedness and hence, the corresponding complexity of an effective solution. Thus, each wicked problem calls for unique analysis and careful resolutions.

How do we resolve Wicked Marketing Problems?

The first step, therefore, in coping with a wicked problem is to recognize its nature, its complexity, its degree of wickedness (Conklin, 2006). Flexibility is the key to the solution of a wicked problem (Becker, 2007). The most fundamental rule for handling wicked

problems is that they must not be treated like tame problems. The problem formulation is not independent of its solution, and vice versa. The appropriate way to tackle wicked problems is thoroughly to discuss them.

There is a tendency in most of us to see problems as tame and to avoid wicked problems through a systematic denial of complex and ill-structured issues, a phenomenon that (Argyris, 1996) called “skilled incompetence.” Hence, an efficient way to resolve wicked marketing problems is not to deny but recognize them. Wicked problems demand an opportunity-driven approach. There are plenty of opportunities for marketers in “un-targeting” vulnerable groups such as children and teenagers for harmful products (e.g. Tobacco, alcohol, illicit drugs, “fatty” foods, guns and gambling).

Takeuchi, H. & Nonaka, (1986) use the Rugby term “Scrum” for adaptive processes that world-class companies use to resolve wicked problems of developing and marketing new products. An essential feature of Scrum is that it forces incremental action that creates basis for stakeholder dialog and project feedback. Scrum provides a way for the development team to make regular progress even if the problem is not well understood. Scrum enables the stakeholders regular opportunity to discuss the problem and reach consensus incrementally (Schwaber, & Beedle, 2001).

What should we avoid in resolving Wicked Problems?

Conklin, (2006) suggests two significant rules to avoid taming wicked problems:

1. *Do not lock down the problem definition.*
2. *Do not give up trying to search for a good solution to the problem.*

Camillus, (2008) offers two more suggestions:

1. *Involve key stakeholders (e.g., customers, employees, creditors, suppliers, and shareholders).*
2. *Keep the focus on action at all times.*

DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE

We submit that all wicked problems that are social and political in character are embedded in a social and macromarketing space such that their solutions call for principles of distributive and corrective justice. Rawls, (1971) defines justice as giving to others what rightfully belongs to them. The theory of distributive justice is particularly relevant when different stakeholders put forth conflicting claims on society's rights and duties, benefits and burdens, and when not all claims can be satisfied. In such cases, the standards of distributive justice are generally taken more seriously than utilitarian considerations (Hare, 1978; Rawls, 1958). The moral right to be treated as free and equal persons is the basic egalitarian foundation of distributive justice (Vlastos, 1962).

When a wicked problem (such as product safety) and its resolutions could profoundly affect individual lives, those in decision making positions have a responsibility to inform affected publics in a timely manner. Failure of this violates the rights of stakeholders. Hence, a wicked problem is a justice problem. Moreover, if this process mandates the redistribution of such information between various stakeholders (based on comparative claims of involved parties), then the resolution process of wicked problems becomes a distributive justice problem. Further, if the solution to the social wicked problem corrects the injustices that the problem has created, then the solution process is within the domain of corrective justice.

Corrective justice (CJ) is concerned with the fair terms of responsibility in sharing benefits and costs of wicked problems. Weinrib, (1995) defines CJ as the idea that liability rectifies the injustice. Aristotle (1964) contrasts CJ with DJ as two different forms of justice. CJ deals with voluntary and involuntary transactions and focuses on whether one party has committed and the other party has suffered a transactional injustice. DJ, on the other hand, deals with the distribution of whatever is divisible among the participants. That is, CJ defines transactions, whereas DJ defines fairness in distribution or allocation of social burdens and benefits. Weinrib, (2002) argues that CJ elaborates principles that govern local or particular interactions, while DJ

elaborates principles of normative global interactions. CJ and DJ differ in the way they construe equality. DJ divides benefits/burdens in accordance with some criterion that compares the relative merits of the participants. DJ thus embodies a proportionate equality – a share according to one's merits. CJ, on the other hand, focuses on the maintenance and the restoration of equality of partners that suffer from a wicked problem. This equality consists and exists in each partner having what lawfully belongs to him or her. Injustice occurs, when, relative to this baseline, one party gains at the expense of the other. The law corrects this injustice by restoring the original or initial equality. Thus, CJ is a rectifying function while DJ is a distributive function. Thus, CJ and DJ complement each other, and we invoke both justice theories in assessing wicked problems and their resolutions.

Injustice arises in the absence of equality, when one person has too much or too little relative to another. Any design of resolving wicked problems is unjust if it implies unequal information sharing, collective intelligence, and collective responsibility between the stakeholders involved in wicked problems.

The Domain of Distributive and Corrective Justice in Wicked Problems

Most wicked problems in marketing call for designing a solution that minimizes social wrongs and enhances common good. Hence, they come under the purview of distributive and corrective justice. All marketing projects involve designing something- either tangible or intangible or both. Both artistically and technically, designing is the process of creating something new (e.g., a safer car, a more fuel-efficient car, a more effective business software or a less intrusive surgical procedure). Any design problem is a problem of resolving tension between what is needed and what can be done given our resources. The world of what is needed is often determined by the customer, the market, the marketing and the sales department, the government or the advocacy groups. The two worlds could be different; the demand world is marked by social complexity while the supply world is marked by technical complexity; the more different they are the more wicked is the problem. If the two worlds cannot agree on what the problem is, how can they agree and align on its solution? For instance, every customer (demand) need has a price tag, and

the design process (supply) is about designing solutions that are feasible and cost effective (Conklin, 2006).

To work effectively on wicked problems, the team members must gain the greatest possible collective understanding related to the problem by ensuring that all members can freely and equitably share their information, knowledge, experience and wisdom on a given problem. Most wicked problems being social in character should build solution-processes that safeguard the principles of distributive and corrective justice. Research that seeks solution to wicked problems can be developed in many ways including cooperative inquiry, participatory action research and solution design. Collective action research must not “instrumentalize” people, that is, use people as “means” for the researchers’ ends (Sullivan & Porter 1997). All stakeholders to a wicked problem must be committed to social justice (e.g., empowerment of the oppressed and marginalized), be it distributive or corrective justice (Blythe, Grabill, & Riley, 2008).

Because wicked problems often occur in social contexts, they tend to involve moral issues. Kohlberg, (1981) argued that our moral development follows six incremental stages. That is, we are moral when we take action to 1) avoid punishment, 2) serve our own needs, 3) be esteemed by others, 4) abide by law and authority, 5) abide by moral contracts or standards, and 6) bring about a just and fair world with universal rights. Wicked problems that imply morality and ethics cannot be resolved with the moral development at the first four levels. Most public servants are still at stage four – abiding by law and authority. We have some hope with stage five – we have a moral contract with society to deal effectively with wicked problems. We can best handle wicked problems with the principles of justice, fairness and universal rights. The principles of distributive justice and corrective justice operate at the sixth stage of moral development.

Correlativity as the Central Principle of CJ

We use CJ as a theoretical doctrine that highlights the role of correlativity as the organizing idea implicit in the relationship between the stakeholders of a wicked problem. The rectification

function in CJ operates correlatively on all parties: the wrongful gain of the one (defendant) must be returned to the other (plaintiff) who was deprived of it. That is, CJ is correlatively structured in the sense that it simultaneously works on both parties in righting the wrong. Justice is thereby achieved for both parties through a single operation.

Applied to social wicked problems, CJ involves three critical factors:

- a) ***Correlatively structured problem***: what belongs to one stakeholder group in the wicked problem (e.g., rights, benefits) has been taken by another stakeholder group or groups;
- b) ***Correlatively structured injustice***: the stakeholders to a wicked problem are connected with the same injustice. What one stakeholder group does and what another stakeholder group experiences are not independent events - they are the active and passive poles of the same injustice. That is, what one group does counts as injustice only if another corresponding group suffers and because of what the first group does, and vice versa.
- c) ***Correlatively structured solution-design***: what one stakeholder group took from another stakeholder group is now returned to the first group, and vice versa.

Liability consists in a legal relationship between two parties, each of which position is intelligible only in the light of that of the other. One stakeholder party cannot be held liable without reference to the harm imposed by the corresponding other stakeholder group. Similarly, one stakeholder party's entitlement exists only in and through the correlative obligation of the corresponding other group.

CJ emphasizes correlativity also in relation to the stakeholder party's right to justice and the other party's duty not to interfere with that right. The injustice that CJ rectifies deals with one group having something or having done something that is incompatible with the other group's

right in relation to what the first group does. Right and duty are correlated when one's right is the basis of the other party's duty, or when the scope of one's duty includes avoiding the infringement of the right that the other suffered. The CJ approach to wicked problems is a balancing position. For instance, CJ must balance between Type I error (rejecting as false what is in fact true) and Type II error (accepting as true what is in fact false). The former is a loss of opportunity or an error of omission, while the latter is a factual loss and an error of commission. Given human nature that frequently leads one to commit both Types I and Type II errors, a CJ approach seeks to avoid both types of error and rectify them (when necessary) in a timely manner (Hubbard, & Paquet, 2007).

Every wicked problem involves risk and a resolution implies a preventive or reactive action to contain risk. Technically, risk depends upon the nature of the threat (intent + capacity) while preventive action depends upon the level of risk plus the nature of the consequences plus the resources available for the preventive action. Risk, however, is not only a technical matter of assessing the nature of the threat, but also depends upon the people and institutions that interpret it, and our confidence in such institutions (Hubbard, & Paquet, 2007). If wicked problems like poverty, crime, violence, terrorism, pollution and corporate fraud continue to persist for decades, if not for centuries, it is because we underestimate the risk involved and our preventive actions are too weak and/or too politically correct.

Applying DJ and CJ to a Wicked Marketing Problem

Selling safe and effective education to children is a wicked marketing problem. School violence and crime is a wicked problem that destroys the marketing of education. As an urgent and relevant wicked problem, we consider the issue of increasing violence and crime in our schools. Every wicked problem can be considered as a symptom of another problem. **Table 2** (column 1) describes the problem of school violence and crime as a set of interconnected symptoms. A wicked problem is a set of interlocking issues and constraints that change over time, embedded in a dynamic social context. Currently, the symptoms included in *Table 2* seem adequately to describe the problem; but more symptoms may emerge in time and some existing symptoms may disappear.

We cannot understand the wicked problem of school violence and crime without knowing about its context, and we cannot meaningfully search for information without the orientation of the solution concept. The immediate social context of school violence and crime has to do with its social symptoms that we have listed in *Table 2*. School violence and crime is relatively new, and possibly dates from violence and crime in movies, TV, and other youth media, proliferation of guns, violence and abuse at dysfunctional homes, drug addictions, violence and crime portrayal on the Internet, violent toys, violence in video games, media sensation of crime, and horror stories. The appropriate way to understand the wicked problem of school violence is to discuss it with relevant stakeholders. Chief among these stakeholders are parents, teachers, students, school administration, pastors, and local law and other officials. Consensus can emerge through the process of laying out alternative understanding of the problem, competing interests, priorities and constraints. Dialogue may help at least to analyze the problem in a well-bounded manner. Wicked problems are best “tamed” through discussion, consensus, iterations, and accepting change as a normal part of the process. It is an adaptive process. Most public policies and business policies are developed in this manner. Most new product development and marketing projects can be resolved using such adaptive processes.

We could explain the causes of school violence and crime in numerous ways. There are many stakeholders involved in the problem of school violence who will have various and changing ideas about what might be a problem, what might be causing it, and how to resolve it. We have listed nine resolutions identified with this problem. A wicked problem such as school violence is a set of interlocking causes and constraints that change over time, embedded in a dynamic social context. We have not included highly technical modern solutions such as electronic tethering of students, electronic surveillance of all school premises, electronic noise and gun detectors, and the like. The list of both symptoms and solutions in *Table 2* is illustrative and not exhaustive. We have assessed each solution by its perceived capacity to contain problem symptoms and ranked it accordingly in terms of its efficiency. The rank is based on principles of corrective justice – the more symptoms a solution controls and corrects, the more correctively just it is.

Conclusions

Wicked problems are those for which each attempt to create a solution changes the understanding of the problem. Considering marketing problems as wicked gives us a better insight in resolving them. The problem definition evolves as new possible solutions are considered and/or implemented (Rittel, & Webber, 1973). This is very true in handling wicked problems in marketing. A specific illustration of this is the wicked problem of school violence – the more symptoms and solution you research, the more the domain of the problem changes. That is, the problem statement is not independent of the solution, and vice versa.

Table 1: Establishing Wickedness of Current Retailing Problems

Characteristic of Wicked Problems	Waves of retailing chain bankruptcies	Wal-Mart	Starbucks	Chrysler	Fannie May and Freddie Mac	Subprime market crisis
Not easily definable	X	x	?	x	x	x
No stopping rule	X	x	X	x	x	x
Solutions are not objectively true or false	X	x	X	x	x	x
Solutions have unexpected consequences over time	X	x	X	x	x	x
Solutions are not learnt by trial and error	?	?	?	x	x	x
Solution set could	X	?	?	x	x	x

be inexhaustible						
Problem is essentially unique and non-classifiable	?	x	?	x	x	x
Symptom of other wicked problems	X	x	X	x	x	x
Involve many stakeholders	X	x	X	x	x	x
Executives resolving wicked problems have no right to be wrong	X	x	X	x	x	x
X -totals	8	9	6	10	10	10



Table 2: A General Morphological Analysis of the Wicked Problem of Crime and Violence in Schools

Problem Symptoms (Symptoms Space)	Problem Resolutions (Solution Space)							
	Beefed police Vigilance in school premises	Fighting Student addictio ns	Parent training	Teacher training	Tougher school discipline	Eradicati ng poverty	Student training	Rewardin g good behavior
1. Street crime and gangs		x				x	x	x
2. Increasing high school dropouts		x	x	x	x	x	x	x
3. Decreasing high school graduation rates		x	x	x	x	x	x	x
4. Peer pressure		x			x		x	x
5. Boredom in schools				x	x		x	x
6. Unqualified teachers				x	x			
7. Dysfunctional homes			x			x	x	x
8. Non-cooperating parents			x	x	x	x	x	x
9. Poverty and destitution						x		x
10. Student addictions	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
11. Wealth and too much pocket money			x		x		x	x
12. General moral decay		x	x	x	x	x	x	x

13. Permissiveness in schools	x	x	x	x	x		x	x
14. Inadequate laws	x							x
15. Lack of police vigilance	x							X
16. Too many guns	x							X
17. Too many criminals						x	x	X
18. Cultural deprivation						x		X
19. Spatial deprivation or inbreeding						x		X
20. Degraded (ghetto) neighborhoods						x		X
21. Genetic conditioning								?
22. Phrenologic aberrations								?
Totals on Symptoms Control	5	7	8	8	10	12	12	19

x = Column resolution can potentially control and correct row symptom of school violence and crime.

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