Numerous social thinkers have worried about the influence of what Jacques Ellul has called "technique" on forms of social organization and human consciousness. Technique can be thought of as more than mere technology; instead, it is an epistemology that guides the development and use of the methods, procedures, sets of assumptions, ways of thinking, and outcomes that characterize virtually any field of modern human endeavor. Marketing professionals (both academicians and practitioners) have not tended to think of their discipline as an application of technique, in Ellul's overarching sense, yet they often find themselves caught in an ill-defined tension between the abstract repercussions of their activity and its pragmatic, results-oriented component. Many marketers, I suspect, would not consider themselves to be agents of social change, but upon analyzing marketing as technique, we discover that pragmatic results and the methods that drive them have their own unexpected and far-reaching consequences.

This chapter conceptualizes marketing practices and their outcomes as technique, thus establishing a unique framework for analyzing the broad social change aspects of marketing. This conceptualization describes technique both at the general level and at the level of selected marketing mix variables. The influence of marketing technique is then investigated in one particularly interesting and neglected way—in terms of its impact on the meanings consumers derive from their consumption experiences. Consumption meanings are traced to the assumptions preceding them, illustrating how consumers derive meaning. Following this, several changes in consumption assumptions resulting

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from the application of marketing technique are explored to illustrate how consumption experiences have acquired new meaning. Finally, the framework explicitly links marketing technique to these changes as part of the total influence that technique has upon the values and assumptions underlying consumer decisions and, ultimately, the meanings ascribed to those decisions. Finally, several important questions are raised for future research.

The Character and Implications of Technique

Technique has been discussed by many social thinkers in the past century (Mumford 1936; Juenger 1956). This chapter draws primarily from Ellul (1964). His thesis is that technique has always existed among human beings and that its practice and essence are the same over time. However, although all techniques are structurally similar, a change has occurred in the relation between technique and society (p. 63). Early technique was developed to relate individuals to their environment (tools, gathering techniques); technique was subordinate to people and was easily adapted because it was firmly enmeshed in the framework of life and culture. Technique, from the eighteenth century on, however, has tended to divorce people from the ecological, reticulated nature of the environment. It has become superordinate, artificial, and no longer a cultural artifact. People no longer adapt technique to their needs; instead technique causes people to adapt to its demands. Technique is uniform and its universal application takes no account of the extreme diversity of the operational environment. Simon identifies two ethics explaining the difference between early and later technique. He claims that later technique has “an ethic that rests on man’s apartness from the rest of nature.” The alternative ethic views “man as a part of nature, governed by natural law” (1977, p. 195).

Technique is results-oriented. At the simplest level, Ellul describes technique as a method or process for achieving some predetermined objective or result. From Ellul’s perspective, results are overemphasized. He explains that a preoccupation with results fixationates the performer on achieving the result to the near exclusion of recognizing other benefits and problems derived from the process itself. Furthermore, a preoccupation with results tends to limit the scope of the problem. That is, how to achieve the desired results becomes the important question and not whether these results have other far-reaching implications or are “appropriate” results to be pursued.

Although Ellul points out that the purpose of technique is to achieve results, he also notes that the preoccupation with results forces a central focus on the method. Simply, if results are to be achieved, then another goal becomes making the method more efficient or effective. Thus, the preoccupation with results creates a preoccupation with finding the “one best way” to achieve them. Furthermore, Ellul argues that the preoccupation with results and the search for the one best way reduce method to its logical dimension alone (p. 79). He cites the specialization of labor and the standardization of modern factories as the most obvious examples of this reduction. The term logical, as used by Ellul, is results-driven; one works backward from the desired result in order to derive the steps that will achieve it. Therefore, a logically derived method or process has little concern for anything other than achieving the result. The method is unidimensional and largely isolated from the environment in which it operates except as the two narrowly interact to achieve the designated objectives.

Technique is amoral. As noted above, technique’s concern with results in turn focuses effort upon improving the methods or means for achieving those results. Ellul extends this argument by claiming that, ironically, the ends are forgotten eventually and the method itself becomes the end. Frederick W. Taylor’s view of the industrial plant as a “closed organism” or an end in itself (1911, p. 133) perfectly expresses this complete separation of the goal from the mechanism. Numerous thinkers decry this separation of means from ends and seek ways to rejoin them but Ellul sees this occurrence as the natural progression of technique. Robert K. Merton notes in the introduction to Ellul’s book that “in the economic sphere, technical economic analysis is substituted for the older political economy included in which was a major concern with the moral structure of economic activity; in the political sphere, doctrine becomes based on what is useful and not what is good, purposeful or the common will of the people” (p. vii). In these examples, the original ends have been subsumed by the methods originally developed to achieve them. Moreover, there emerged a shift from a concern with what is right or what ought to be to a concern with what is or what will work. Fundamentally, the separation seems to lie in the distinction between positive and normative questions. Ellul argues that the perpetuation of technique (and its attendant results-oriented and logical dimensions) divorces the normative questions from their proper sphere and focuses questions on what is and the feasibility of what is. As a result, technique tends to be amoral; it exists outside of questions of its appropriateness. Ellul argues that “the principal characteristic to technique is its refusal to tolerate moral judgements; it is absolutely independent from them and eliminates them from its domain; technique never observes the distinction between moral and immoral. It tends, on the contrary, to create a completely independent technical morality” (p. 95). This “technical morality” is instrumental in nature and is unconcerned with seeking truth, upholding values beyond its own, or answering to any other moral or ethical questions.

Technique is self-augmenting. Ellul further argues that technique is self-augmenting—it is progressive in its development, creating whole new fields for
its application and generating previously nonexistent problems that can only be solved by further development and application of technique. In other words, technique engenders itself. When one technical form appears, it makes possible and even inevitable a number of others (p. 87). To take a simple example, the production of the internal-combustion engine engendered the techniques of the automobile, submarine, and airplane. To cite a more disturbing example, an offshoot of the NASA space program was a technique for producing styrofoam. Companies soon adopted this technique for the mass production of disposable cups, plates, and coolers. However, these same objects became environmental hazards because of their nonbiodegradable construction; hence, technique spawned a potential crisis which only it can hope to answer.

Technique is universal. This characteristic has two important applications. First, technique’s essential features are identical wherever it is introduced. Ellul notes that the details of technique’s development may be different because of climate, population, or country, but its course is uniform in essence, operation, and effect once these variable factors have been weakened or overcome. Vogt (1948) shows that, in the area of agriculture, the most-up-to-date techniques have become universal. The techniques of mass production are also becoming increasingly homogeneous in such widely disparate cultures as China and Brazil. Second, in correspondence with the first application, the effects on the societies that technique enters are universal. Sociologists today recognize that the impact of techniques is destroying non-Western civilizations. This involves the collapse of cultural and economic forms as well as traditional psychological structures. Ellul argues this point, noting: “Technical invasion does not involve the simple addition of new values to old ones. It does not put new wine into old bottles; it does not introduce new content into old forms. The old bottles are all being broken. The old civilizations collapse on contact with the new” (p. 121).

The multinational corporation of today represents a vehicle for spreading technique’s universality and culture-shaping power, strewing the earth with the broken bottles of lost cultures, as nation after nation seek the benefits of industrial technique and ignore the possible social costs.

This section described the character and implications of technique. Technique was shown to be results-oriented, seeking the “one best way” to achieve those results; to reduce method to its logical dimension alone and, thus, be amoral or autonomous; and, finally, to be self-augmenting in its development and universal in its form and effects upon culture and people. The following section defines marketing as it is currently conceptualized. This discussion sets the stage for the subsequent development of a framework for analyzing the technique-oriented aspects of marketing and the influences they have on human behavior and culture.

Marketing: a Definition

Since the mid 1960s, the marketing discipline has been arguing the question: “What is marketing?” This debate has settled little, yet has expanded and enriched the view of the field both on the inside and the outside. Over the years, one obvious trend has been the use of marketing in widely differentiated domains (politics, health care, charitable organizations) with a wide range of purposes (elect a candidate, fill a hospital bed, raise nonprofit monies). Marketing, in a sense, has been broadened (Kotler and Levy 1969; Kotler and Zaltman 1972; Kotler 1972). And although the field is without unanimity on the value of this change, the extent of it, and marketer responsibility in these developments (Luck 1969; Arndt 1978), the discipline generally acknowledges this movement.

Recently, the American Marketing Association adopted a definition of marketing that shows the wide-ranging dimensions of the activity. The group agreed that marketing is “the process of planning and executing the conception, pricing, promotion, and distribution of ideas, goods, and services to create exchanges that satisfy individual and organizational objectives” (Atac 1985, p. 2).

Marketing has evolved from an era where production was the focus, to an era where sales and selling were central, to the current era where the marketing concept is the theoretical goal. The marketing concept suggests that marketers attempt to find out what the consumer wants/needs and then attempt to meet those needs and wants in the form of products and services.

Marketing is also conceptualized as consisting of the four P’s (product, price, promotion, and place or distribution) as the definition above clearly illustrates. The configuration of these four components, commonly called the marketing mix, results in a successful marketing effort. Using these definitional properties of marketing, the following sections argue that there are technique-oriented aspects of marketing, in Ellul’s sense, that affect individuals’ consumption meanings and, thus, drive human desires to adapt to the necessities of marketing technique.

Technique-Oriented Aspects of Marketing

Before beginning this examination, it is important to make the following note. Marketing is a part of society and, thus, has been developing as a part of the historical evolution of human beings and their world. As Ellul notes, technique has infiltrated every aspect of human activity and has perpetuated its own need and use. Marketing, as such, has been a step in the progression of technique. This is not to discount marketing’s role in this perpetuation. However, we must
be careful not to place the responsibility for this progression solely in the hands of marketing. As Firth notes, "the characteristics primarily attributable to marketing have developed as a result of societal necessities created by capitalist growth and developments" (which are also links in the progression of technique) (1984, p. 5). With this warning in mind, technique-oriented aspects of marketing are characterized at the general level and among select marketing mix variables.

One aspect of technique to which marketing is akin is the concern with results. Largely because marketing is an organizational effort (profit or non-profit), this fact is self-evident. Whether it be meeting customer needs, filling sales quotas, penetrating markets, decreasing viewer miscomprehension, achieving organizational objectives, filling hospital beds, or increasing capital productivity (human or monetary), results are clearly articulated by the marketing process. One outcome of this concern with results, Ellul notes, is the tendency to fixate on results to the near exclusion of learning from the process itself. Park and Smith (1985) note this occurrence in marketing by pointing out that many managers focus on market share as the goal of their efforts to such an extent that they fail to learn from competitors' mistakes and innovative ideas.

In the area of market research information, Desphande and Zaltman (1982) discovered that research performed for previous market studies goes virtually unused, when, in fact, it may be quite appropriate to the questions currently being asked. In this case, the results have driven the process to the extent that previous learning is overlooked.

The fact that marketers operate in an environment where there is over-emphasis on achieving results may in fact lead them to neglect the consequences of their acts. Most important is the tendency to ignore the implications of results. Marketing practitioners have been criticized for this tendency by pursuing short-term results without considering the repercussions of such results on the environment (Sircy, Samli, and Meadow 1983), social organization (Reisman 1950), and values (Baier and Rescher 1969). Often the exigencies of organization life prompt behaviors that segments of broader society find unacceptable. This concern for immediate results prompted Kotler to state that "the sensitive marketer has to take responsibility for the totality of outputs created" (1980, p. 16). Such a marketer would worry about not only achieving results but also the effects of doing so. Marketing scholars are also subject to the same tendency, but with an interesting difference. In the push to publish or to meet the "scientific" criteria of the discipline (the desired results for scholars), theories and empirical research remain far from practitioner's needs. Researchers seem to have little concern for the real-world implications of their ideas. The repercussions of this divergence are practically unusable research and an increased likelihood for misunderstood or misapplied ideas.

The reduction of marketing technique to its logical dimension alone is indicated by the virtual absence of other important dimensions, (for example, social, moral, and ethical ones). This logical dimension demands that tasks be accomplished in a way that will achieve results most efficiently. As a result, marketing technique can be shown to be amoral or autonomous of social and ethical standards. The marketing definition discussed above either ignores or presumes a normative dimension in these areas. It seems to have left out the fact that marketing is a process that must be carried out within a society and, therefore, must operate within the social parameters of justice, ethics, and morality. Tawney argues otherwise, stating that "business exists to promote the ends of society, whereas hitherto society has been regarded in the world of business as existing to promote them" (1920, p. 26).

The absence of other dimensions in technique-oriented aspects of marketing has had the effect of replacing human values with exchange values (Fromm 1955). Activities, objects, and human beings themselves are experienced in a manner that emphasizes their exchange values; they are evaluated with an abstract and quantifying attitude. Exchange values tend to extract life from its human dimensions. Human values, on the other hand, rely on concrete experience of objects, activities, and individuals outside of questions of their manageability and exchange value. An exclusive focus on exchange values alienates individuals from their acts and the effects of their acts upon objects and others. Ellul would argue, and I would agree, that technique has the potential to do totally away with human values (e.g., natural rights, political rights, intrinsic human worth) even to the extent that some commonly accepted "truths" are discarded. Technique-oriented aspects of marketing have similar potential. Fromm cites a hard-hitting example of this distinction. He notes that the same people who would probably be incapable of even slapping, not to speak of killing, a helpless person could push the button of a nuclear warhead and cause the destruction of hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children because the button and the deaths have no "real" or meaningful connection to them.

Technique-oriented aspects of marketing provide for similar opportunities. Marketers' ideas of "the consumer" or "a segment" are constructed by abstracting and quantifying human beings, looking at their perceptions, desires, and values in a very mechanized and exchange-oriented fashion without considering their human dimensions (except as they relate to exchange). Marketing academicians have also perpetuated this process. By adhering to logical empiricism, researchers approach human behavior searching for empirical support for theoretical generalizations. This paradigm suggests that humans are merely instruments and science is not concerned with making value statements about their welfare or betterment (Arndt 1985, p. 13). McGuire (1973) supports this assault, stating that scientists contemplate data, not life.

Increasing commercialization provides another example of technique's propensity for displacing—even consuming—human values. Product and brand proliferation is only one tangible aspect of this phenomenon; commer-
cialization is, in addition, a way of thinking. Consistent with exchange values, modern commercialization promotes the idea that everything—love, sex, friendship, beauty, approval, status, respect—can be bought and sold in almost any situation. As one aspect of marketing technique, this expanded notion of commercialization promotes life’s intangible essences in bottles, tubes, and cans. We try to buy the satisfactions of life that formerly were earned or given freely.

Related to increased commercialization is the perpetuation of the use of material resources for nonmaterial needs. This activity is called compensation. In this case, the individual substitutes an artificial need for the real need (artificial needs may be created and stimulated by means of marketing activities) (Gronmo 1984). For example, a young woman views herself as a social misfit and feels a need to make friends. This real need is overlaid with an artificial need which might say something such as “I need to dress more fashionably or wear more make-up.” Fou’s (1971) experiments validated his hypothesis that attempts to meet such needs through the use of “compensatory behavior” are rather unsuccessful and frustrating. Furthermore, Leiss (1974) develops the idea that human desires are insatiable because people always generate new wants as soon as the old are satisfied. However, individuals continue to try to meet such needs because marketing and especially advertising use such suggestions and promises to increase the appeal of their products and services. An equally important question that has gone unasked is whether people who forgo such a product or service are led to believe that they must also forgo the promise as well. If consumers decide they do not want to wear make-up or dress fashionably, are they therefore socially unacceptable? Is the nonbuyer without, merely because the buyer is with? Such a possibility could do much to alter the way consumers assign meaning to their consumption experiences or lack of consumption experiences.

The use of commercialization in the above sense is very results-oriented and tends to be logical at the expense of thoughtfulness or concern with the effects of such uses. Roszak explains that the reason for the use of technique in this manner is that it (technocracy, as he calls it) has promulgated its own secret success. It has convinced us that:

In that sense, consumers may find satisfaction for their needs because they expect it and other vital needs may be overlooked because they are not addressed by commercialized products.

One outcome of the results-oriented and self-augmentative nature of marketing technique is the increasing complexity of products and the rate of technological innovation introduction. As Atac notes, “Many products and processes are invented long before a consumer need has been established—sometimes the products are so futuristic that consumers can’t even assess potential need; these conditions challenge the abilities of marketing researchers and their techniques” (1985, p. 2). Atac claims that finding product needs is now the job of marketing researchers. One can clearly see the distinction between this and the marketing concept, which starts with looking at consumer needs and aims to build profits through integrating marketing efforts to satisfy consumers.

This new role of marketing technique also lends itself to the universality characteristic. In the article discussed above, Atac asserts that as a result of businesses being internationalized, they are “marketing products in countries where consumer needs are not of primary importance.” Atac cites Kotler’s comment, “I now believe that marketers can influence the environment in which the firm operates and do not simply have to accept and adapt to it” (p. 2). Atac suggests that the use of marketing tools such as public relations and government lobbying “may turn buyer’s markets into seller’s markets where consumers’ needs lose priority” (p. 2). And although he notes that it is getting more difficult for researchers to justify their actions from the perspective of the marketing concept, he contends that (quite in line with the characteristics of marketing technique) “if the job of the marketing executive is to find a satisfactory market, the job of the researcher is to supply the information to achieve that goal and whether the researcher does so by finding a need for a product or finding a product for a need is of secondary concern” (p. 2). Putting the ethics of this situation aside, the application of marketing techniques in this way clearly lends itself to the character of technique—that means evolve into ends.

Advertising is the most powerful of marketing’s promotion methods and certainly contains characteristics of technique. First, advertising is results-oriented—it is designed to prompt attention, interest, search, and, ultimately, consumption. If a particular ad does not provide the desired response, it is replaced or redesigned. The preoccupation with results has prompted advertisers to search for the most efficient way to achieve their objectives. Pollay notes the extent of this orientation in applied behavioral technologies for consumer behavior and advertising research. He states that these techniques “like most technologies today, have grown increasingly sophisticated and elaborate. This gives at least the major advertiser a large arsenal of information and the technique with which to fine tune a message, aided by an army of
experienced professionals running market research surveys, focus groups, copy testing procedures, recall and awareness tests and test markets” (1986, p. 18).

Qualter (1962) notes some of the repercussions of this preoccupation with results. He states:

As advertising became increasingly significant, closer and more specialized attention was given to the study of technique and method. Advertisers discovered the power of the nonrational, the appeal of novelty, the force of repetition and the need for simplicity. Necessity compelled advertisers to develop the most effective process for presenting an idea in a form in which it would be seen, understood, remembered and acted upon. They tended thereby to over-emphasize the irrational and the spectacular. (1962, p. 45-46)

The fascinating and ironic feature of this transformation is that the technique of advertising acknowledges and incorporates irrationality and incomprehensible human motivations into its processes in a thoroughly logical fashion. The logic of this irrationality lies in the systematic use of “repetitive, fantastic, one-sided, often exhortative rhetorical styles of advertising [which] blur the distinction between reality and fantasy” (Pollay 1986, p. 26.)

Advertising has also taken on a reality quite distinct from the society to which it is delivered. Belk and Pollay note that the images used in advertising are not very reality-based (1985, p. 888). These images blur occupational realities, income realities, suffering realities, and life-style (material possession) realities, tending to perpetuate a stereotype of the “good life.” The images used in marketing have several distinct attributes lending themselves to the character of technique. In The Image, Boorstin describes the attributes of image use as:

1. Synthetic. They are planned and created especially for a purpose, to make a certain kind of impression (trademark, brand name). Often they can disguise what actually exists.
2. Believable. They serve no purpose unless they are believable. (“Ivory soap is 99.44 percent pure.”)
3. Passive. Images act as invitations to behavior; they invite individuals to passively fit themselves to images rather than individuating. “Products have become props for images into which sellers assume consumers will try to passively fit themselves.”
4. Vivid and concrete. They often appeal to the senses; they must be more graspable than any specific list of objectives.
5. Simplified. They must be simpler than the objects they represent, yet not so handy as to seem the natural symbol for the whole class of objects they describe (Kleenex, Xerox, Band-aid).
6. Ambiguous. They float somewhere between the imagination and the senses, between expectation and reality. (The use of fuzzy outlines was designed to make it easier for the viewer to see whatever he wished to see.) (1982, p. 183-194.)

Advertising’s use of images reflects these attributes and has led to a shift from an emphasis on “truth” to an emphasis on “credibility.” The real has been replaced by the image—it has become the real (Boorstin 1982; Boulding 1956). Boorstin argues that we have lost our sense of reality because of the use of images. These images in return homogenize our experience, perpetuating the illusion. These repercussions are not normally considered by marketers as they seek to improve their methods and achieve their goals.

Marketing technique is also self-augmenting—it is progressive in its development, creating whole new fields for its application. The “generic concept of marketing” put forth by Kotler (1972) holds that marketing is a relevant subject for all organizations in their relations with all their publics, not only their customers. Today, all types of organizations apply marketing techniques—even health care organizations, educational institutions, charitable organizations, and political parties. Independent professionals such as doctors and lawyers have also been applying these techniques. The advent of social marketing (Kotler and Zaltman 1972; Kotler and Levy 1969) illustrates the augmenting effect of marketing. Social marketing has been defined as “the design, implementation and control of programs calculated to influence the acceptability of social ideas involving considerations of product, pricing, planning, communication, distribution, and marketing research” (Kotler and Zaltman 1972). Therefore, marketing now considers social change within its domain. This author would not argue that these developments are inherently bad; however, it is important to point out that it is the technique that drives these applications. Marketing has been used very successfully in all of these domains, and yet both practitioners and academicians must be alert to these technique-driven applications and use great care and foresight so that new and different problems do not arise. For example, a great deal of discomfort rippled through the discipline when the discussion of marketing abortion services began a few years ago.

Other examples of marketing’s self-augmenting nature are found in most consumer goods industries. In the computer industry, consumers face an increasing number of “extras” that solve “problems” of time, knowledge, money, and comfort. Cosmetics are another example. Many companies are moving to the “full facial care treatment” and establishing complete product lines of cleansers, toners, day and night moisturizers, astringents, masks, powders, bases, and blushes. In addition, the customer is led to believe that each product’s success depends upon using the “system” of products. For example, Clinique’s facial care system engenders itself—when one product is used, it conditions the use of a number of other Clinique products.

Finally, marketing technique is universal. In the past twenty years, we have witnessed the application of marketing technique all over the world. Lately, we have seen marketers calling for the refinement of this technique as markets become more developed and competitive (Wind, Douglas, and Perlmutter
1973; Walters 1975; Lauter and Dixie 1975). As with the techniques, there are differences in the form of marketing techniques found in all parts of the world because of basic differences in population, climate, and country (culture, values, and language). However, Ellul notes, as these differences diminish or are overcome (and he predicts this will occur because of the application of technique), marketing techniques too will become more and more similar. Even now, we find that marketing techniques are uniform in essence, operation, and effect in the areas of franchise systems (Walker and Etzel 1973) and food retailing (Goldman 1974).

However, to date, marketers have shown little concern for the effects of their efforts upon the cultures they enter. This is not to say that advancements have not been made and societies improved, but, again, the important point is that technique drives these applications. Marketers must be sensitive to the diversity of cultures and the repercussions of their activities. As yet, this sensitivity has not been reflected in the literature or in the work of practitioners. Marketing technique continues to shape cultures in line with its universal characteristic. Levitt agrees that world differences will be overcome, noting "Everywhere everything gets more and more like everything else as the world's preference structure is relentlessly homogenized" (1983, p. 93). In fact, Levitt supports this change by advocating a global marketing strategy that does not account for cultural differences. Dholakia and Sherry (1986) interpret this advocacy as an explicit championing of marketing as a global acculturating agent. Alternatively, Sherry (1985) advocates the adoption of a cultural perspective in marketing and consumer research, pointing to the fact that the global marketplace is comprised of a myriad of cultural systems, each with its own meaning systems and material flows. Hirschman (1985) also suggests the importance of looking at the needs of different cultural systems and the potential for dysfunctional consequences of marketing. Specifically, she notes that marketing's role as a social agent often creates unnecessary and harmful demand, population displacement, unemployment, and an intensified social structure.

The Nature of Consumption Meanings

Before exploring the nature of consumption meanings, it is important to consider the more general question of what is meaning. This question pierces into important domains of thought involving philosophy, psychology, sociology, politics, and economics. This section focuses primarily on the individual level of analysis although it is acknowledged that many sources influence and interpret meaning as it is subsumed in the individual human being.

One profound and important work addressing this issue is Viktor Frankl's Man's Search for Meaning (1959), which delves into such questions as "What is meaning?" and "How do individuals acquire it?" In brief, his approach describes "man's search for meaning as a primary force in his life and not just a 'secondary rationalization' of instinctual drives" (p. 154). He describes meaning as unique in that it must and can be fulfilled by the individual alone. Meaning is not something that is derived from specific acts, things, or experiences. It is not a commodity that can be bought and sold. Frankl notes a distinction between meaning as an expression of the self and the will to meaning. The expressive type of meaning has been studied extensively by consumer researchers and value researchers. It depicts humans as emerging into existence, defining themselves through expression of their values and needs, and finding meaning through these thoughts, things, and activities. In contrast, Frankl notes:

The will to meaning is not only an emergence from existence itself (through self-expression), but rather something confronting existence. If meaning that is waiting to be fulfilled by man were nothing but a mere expression of self, or no more than a projection of his wishful thinking, it would immediately lose its demanding and challenging character; it could no longer summon him. (p. 156)
Frankl's thought is displayed powerfully in the words of Nietzsche: "He who has a why to live can bear any how." Frankl's experiences as a prisoner at Auschwitz led him to note that meaning lies in the why, not the how, the fundamental distinction being that human beings' lives have meaning because there is some purpose or significance to their continuation, not because of how they package that life or express it.

How do meanings derived from consumption experiences fit into Frankl's discourse? By answering this question, I hope to illuminate one of the many ways that technique has influenced consumption meanings. Consumption experiences have been shown to have meaning merely because they occur within a larger cultural system. This system identifies, organizes, and relates its components to one another through systems of meaning (McCracken 1985a; Sherry 1983). Culture's defining categories and principles provide material objects, activities, and, hence, consumption experiences, with different levels and types of meanings. Individuals (within that system) can derive varying degrees of "how" and "why" meanings from these experiences.

Consumption meanings, in line with Frankl's thinking, should ideally help human beings answer the "why" question in life. And yet, the meaning derived from and linked to consumption experiences has been argued as supporting and furthering primarily the "how" question (Veblen 1899; Slater 1980; Fromm 1968). That is to say, the meaning derived from consumption experiences focuses the individual on "how" the person is to live rather than on "why." Fromm supports this contention in his argument that "the act of consumption should be a meaningful human productive experience. In our culture, there is little of that. Consuming is essentially the satisfaction of artificially stimulated phantasies; a phantasy performance alienated from our concrete real selves" (1955, p. 122).

Consumption meanings have been argued to have lost their link to the deeper question of the why of meaning and have evolved into ends in their own right. This focus is the result of the "technologizing" of consumption meanings. The remainder of this chapter investigates this technologizing process and marketing's role in its promulgation.

**Consumption Assumptions**

As I have stated, consumption experiences are void of meaning aside from their situational particulars. Meaning is derived in each situation from the application and operation of individuals' "consumption assumptions." These assumptions suggest that certain outcomes will result or certain values will be realized through products, services, and consuming behaviors. These assumptions come from many sources—family, history, peer groups, institutions in society, media, and advertising, to name just a few. In almost all product categories and classes and among consuming behaviors, one can find a set of assumptions used to provide the consumption experience with particular meaning(s). Consumption assumptions operate in two important places. First, consumption assumptions are made about the product's or service's ability to meet the consumer's desired consequences. For instance, a consumer perceives that a new line of automobiles is high quality, luxurious, and very expensive. Consumers frame these perceived product attributes with a set of assumptions that relate the product to the outcomes or consequences they expect. For example, the consumption assumption a consumer might use implies that "high-quality, new, expensive, and luxurious cars make people (purchasers, users) more visible to others." This assumption provides the consumption experience with meaning. The meaning, of course, will be different across consumers as different assumptions are evoked. In this case, meaning exists not in the attributes or the bundles of attributes, but in the ideas or assumptions according to which these and other phenomena are organized and evaluated (McCracken 1985a).

A second set of consumption assumptions is made about the consequences of using the product or service or of performing the consuming behavior. These assumptions relate to the consequences' ability to meet the individual's values. Gutman (1982) notes the relationship between consequences and values, but does not acknowledge the operation of consumption assumptions. It is this author's contention that assumptions provide consumers with some reason to believe that their values can be met by the consequences that result from the consumption experience. Referring to the earlier example, consumers have assumed that a certain expensive, luxurious car will make them more visible. The consequence of increased visibility may be related to the realization of a value (for example, social recognition) as a result of the consumption assumption evoked. This assumption may imply, "People who are more visible are socially esteemed." This assumption provides the consumption experience with meaning as a result of its linking values and consequences. McCracken explains similarly, "Goods represent tangible objects of the phenomenal world in which principles can be invested and which can then serve as the tangible representation of intangible values" (1985a, p. 22). Again, it should be noted that these assumptions vary across consumers.

**The Influence of Technique-Oriented Aspects of Marketing on Consumption Meanings via Consumption Assumptions**

Technique-oriented aspects of marketing have had a profound influence on the meanings individuals attach to consumption experiences. Marketing's increasingly results-oriented, logical, autonomous, amoral, self-augmentative, and universal character has played a fundamental role in changing consumption assumptions. How has this occurred specifically? Recall from the preceding
discussion that one set of consumption assumptions is made about how the product or service will provide for certain consequences. Marketing technique has strengthened this set of assumptions considerably. First, as discussed earlier, the widespread use of commercialization to sell things as beauty, love, sex, and friendship has led the consumer to believe that certain products or services will lead to certain outcomes or consequences. This use of commercialization has been supported by the extensive use of images and symbols in marketing, especially in advertising. These images and symbols are imbued with meaning which consumers transfer to the product and what it can do for them (Levy 1959; Grubb and Grathwohl 1967; Reynolds and Gutman 1984). Some critics believe this so much that one was prompted to ask the question, "Do television commercials make people behave like Pavlov's dogs?" (Wall Street Journal 1984). Roszak questions the use of symbols and images in this way, claiming an "eclipse of meaning" has occurred. He explains:

Symbols also find their technological expression. Things go wrong when a culture cuts symbols away from their transcendent correspondence and so allows them to densify; then our sense of reality diminishes. We begin to think of the experience as being uniquely in this material object; the object becomes the real thing. A symbol that has become dense carries no enduring meaning into life; it has become only an opaque object before the senses; it cannot transcend itself. They leave ungratified that dimension of the self which reaches out into the world for enduring purpose, undying value. (1969, p. 346–48)

The second set of consumption assumptions relates the consequences of product or service use to the achievement of values. The influence of marketing technique on this set of assumptions parallels the influences noted above—images, symbols, and commercialization are used to suggest that the consequences of consuming result in value acquisition. Consumption assumptions are also strengthened by changes in values that occur as a result of marketing technique. Thus, the effect on consumption assumptions is indirect but nevertheless important to note, as it is these assumptions that ultimately link products/services and values.

**Deflecting the Success Ethic**

There are two important changes in values that can be traced to technique. The first has been termed the "deflection of the success ethic from the sphere of production to that of consumption" (Nicosia and Mayer 1976, p. 23). For example, Mills (1951) and Bell (1960) point out that if status aspirations are frustrated at work, these aspirations are likely to be more strongly emphasized off the job. Coleman and Rainwater suggest that occupational status may no longer be a useful indicator of social standing as in the past. They cite a typical response to support that view: "If you can afford to live in a nice neighborhood, no one really cares what you do for a living" (1978, p. 25). Belk notes a similar deflection among yuppies (young, urban professionals) because they must endure slow job mobility relative to their aspirations and, therefore, have little reward to justify their work effort and lives. This group has seemingly turned to consumption for their gratifications (1985, p. 516).

Galbraith sees such a deflection as a natural progression of our industrialized (technological) society. He states, "Because the society sets great store by its ability to produce a high standard of living, it evaluates people by the products they possess. The urge to consume is fathered by the value system which emphasizes the ability of the society to produce" (1958, p. 155). Veblen notes a similar consequence in the evolution of an industrial society: "The basis on which good repute in any highly organized industrial community ultimately rests is pecuniary strength; and the means of showing a pecuniary strength, and so of gaining or retaining a good name, are leisure and conspicuous consumption of goods" (1899, p. 7). The deflection of the success ethic from the production sphere to the consumption sphere changes the values of individuals as well as the assumptions they make about consumption experience to meet those values, thus altering the relationship between the two. This deflection strengthens the relationship and provides the consumption experience with new meanings and uses.

**Focus on the Self**

Another fundamental shift in values and consumption assumptions is the present focus on "the self" rather than on "others" or "the social community" (Yankelovich 1981; Lasch 1978; Fromm 1955; Slater 1980). Rokeach (1968) describes how values can have either a social (interpersonal, society-centered) focus or a personal (intrapersonal, self-centered) focus. These two focuses seem to be proportional to one another; in other words, an increase in a social focus involves some trade-offs in terms of a personal focus and vice versa. Clearly, the trend toward a preoccupation with the self and personal matters has implications for consumption assumptions as well.

Yankelovich (1981) empirically documents this trend toward a preoccupation with the self in New Rules. Therein he describes how "personal fulfillment is at the center of many of our lives" (p. 70) and the new moral principle of our era is "I have a duty to myself" (p. xviii). Simply stated, Americans have latched on to a new "giving and getting compact." The old compact was built on the belief that self-denial, sacrifice, obeying the rules, and subordinating the self to the institution all made sense (p. 231). The new compact denies this historically derived set of beliefs. The new giving and getting compact is primarily intrapersonal in nature, focusing on the many things the individual
deserves at the expense of interpersonal obligations. Returning to Rokeach, the trade-off becomes clear—historians note the increasing weakening of a social contract (Bell 1976). Carmen (1979) suggests that societal norms are being replaced by consumption efforts with the goal of being "right" with one's self. Individual values do seem to be narrowing in scope, focusing more pointedly on "the self." The trade-off between individualism and a sense of community seems to be an important part of our culture today (Bellah et al. 1985). As Lasch says, "To live for the moment is the prevailing passion—to live for yourself, not for your predecessors or posterity" (1978, p. 5).

Marketing technique perpetuates the alienation of individuals from one another by supporting the values and consumption assumptions that do so. For example, this shift in values could have the following effects on the consumption assumptions an individual makes: (1) Product/service purchase and use are imbued with more meaning if they promise to provide self-fulfillment and "the duty to oneself." (2) Consumption for personal ends is more meaningful than consumption for societal ends. These hypotheses are meant to provoke attention to the effects of this value change on consumption assumptions.

Closing the Loop: The Relationship of Consumption Meanings to Life Meanings

Consumption meanings fit into life meanings in a complicated way. Belk asks the question, "What role does consumption satisfaction play in life satisfaction?" (1983, p. 518). This author puts forth the question, "What role do consumption meanings play in life meanings?" and promotes it as a viable and important research question that needs to be answered. If marketing academicians and practitioners are truly to understand the nature of consumption and its relationship to life meanings, they need to investigate the relationship of the two in a more systematic and effective manner.

An important contention of this chapter is that technique-oriented aspects of marketing tend to focus on answering the "how" question instead of the "why" question. Some critics argue that this focus results in individuals perceiving the "how" as the "why" of meaning. That is, individuals have begun to regard consumption experiences and meanings as an end in themselves and not as the means to chosen ends or "whys" (Fromm 1955; Slater 1980; Cskszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981). The effect of this confusion of means and ends and hows and whys on life meanings is a critical issue to be dealt with. Have humans lost sight of their true ends? Have they been reduced to Fromm's depiction of "homo consumers?"

One researcher speculates that consumers displace "why" meanings because they are confronted with the recognition that reality is impervious to their personal ideals (McCracken 1985b). Furthermore, he notes that consum-ers then try to recover this lost meaning by acquiring objects that act as a bridge to this idealized version of life (p. 18). I would argue that marketing technique has two roles in this process that are worthy of investigation. First, marketing technique may affect the way that consumers form "why" meanings. For example, the use of images and the enlarged sphere of commercialization may encourage people to develop "why" meanings (those that point their significance or purpose) that are unrealistic or unattainable by most humans. On the other hand, marketing technique may have the effect of trivializing human purpose. For either case, consumers may respond by displacing "why" meanings and attempting to recover the lost meaning in their lives through "how" meanings.

Another direction for future research may be in empirically documenting changes in the consumption assumptions consumers hold. Such research would be an invaluable tool for tracking the extent to which marketing technique influences the assignment of meaning. Furthermore, such documentation may provide the impetus for marketing to take some responsibility for its role in this change. Finally, as mentioned earlier in the chapter, marketing technique is only one of the many types of technique. Understanding the relationship between marketing technique and other forms of technique (political, social, scientific) may also shed some light on the overall effects of technique. Is there a synergistic effect between different forms of technique? How are consumers, consumption meanings, and life meanings affected by the combined influence of these techniques? The importance of thinking about such issues cannot be understated.

Conclusion

Technique-oriented aspects of marketing are but one aspect of technique in general. There exist many other forms of technique which influence our lives and meanings. Political, social, and economic techniques also impact our values and consumption assumptions. However, this chapter has sought to expose only one aspect of the manner in which technique has influenced our lives—primarily, to show how marketing at both the general and specific levels has taken on the attributes of technique described by Ellul (1964). It is in this character that one important and interesting area of consumption has been discussed—meaning. Consumption experiences were shown to have meaning because of the consumption assumptions made about the experiences. These meanings have been altered over time due to fundamental changes in the consumption assumptions used by consumers. Technique-oriented aspects of marketing were shown to have influenced these assumptions and, as a result, consumption meanings were shown to have been altered. Finally, the relation-
ship between consumption meanings and life meanings was discussed and important questions were posed for future thinking on this topic of concern.

If Ellul is correct on the nature of technique, then marketing scholars and practitioners are indeed, however unwittingly, crucial agents of social change. The existence of marketing technique that drives itself, that ignores and overrides the richness of cultural diversity, that turns away from ethical issues, may be an endless source of positive, productive change. But it may also foster new and more terrible problems, and it may radically alter the nature of human consciousness and the search for meaning in ways as yet undreamed of. To the extent that marketing professionals can give careful consideration to these issues, many of the undesirable consequences of the application of technique may yet be avoided.

Notes

1. Technique, notes Ellul, is autonomous. Individuals and societies no longer determine which techniques will be operative. Accompanying technique is a technical mentality and morality which preconditions the selection and continuation of technical solutions to problems. This notion is explored in the sections that follow.

2. Commercialization is the process of making something a commodity, of putting it on the market for sale and profit (Guralnik 1978).

3. However, if the young woman’s attempts result in the acquisition of more friends and admirers, the situation may still be viewed as dysfunctional. The accepted reality cannot be fully integrated into the young woman if she does not have an accompanying psychic change. Moreover, the precedent of overlaying real needs with artificial needs may alienate the woman from herself, regardless of how successful she is in meeting her social needs in this manner.

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