

# Marketing Behavior and Executive Action (MBEA): A Forgotten Marketing Literature in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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## ABSTRACT

*Marketing Behavior and Executive Action (MBEA) (1957)* is a breakthrough marketing literature of the 1950s due to its three major contributions to marketing theory and thought including shifting the focus of marketing thought from distribution to marketing management, expanding the foundations of the discipline from economics to a broader perspective in the behavioral sciences, and shifting the focus from description to theory building based on the functionalist approach. However, since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, *MBEA* has been almost forgotten due to the emergence of the 4Ps paradigm in marketing education, the important role of empirical testability, the change in demographics such as the change of decision buying from household to individual buying and the increased numbers of working women, and the advent of marketing concept and the increasing number of professional marketing managers in response to the increasing important roles of marketing functions in various types of business organizations.

## บทคัดย่อ

*Marketing Behavior and Executive Action (MBEA) (1957)* จัดเป็นหนังสือทางการตลาดที่สำคัญในปี ค.ศ. 1950 เนื่องจากหนังสือเล่มนี้ไปเปลี่ยนการให้ความสำคัญกับการจำหน่าย (distribution) เป็นการจัดการทางการตลาด (marketing management) ขยายพื้นฐานทางการตลาดจากเศรษฐศาสตร์ (economics) ไปครอบคลุมพฤติกรรมศาสตร์ (behavioral sciences) และเปลี่ยนการให้ความสำคัญในการอธิบาย (description) เป็นการสร้างทฤษฎี (theory building) โดยใช้วิธีการ functionalist อย่างไรก็ตามหนังสือเล่มนี้เกือบถูกลืมเลือนตั้งแต่ต้น 21<sup>st</sup> century เนื่องจากการเกิดขึ้นของส่วนผสมทางการตลาด (4Ps) ในการเรียนการสอนการตลาด การให้ความสำคัญกับการทดสอบทฤษฎีด้วยการสังเกต และเก็บข้อมูลจากประชากรเป้าหมายจริงสังเกต การเปลี่ยนแปลงทางด้านประชากรศาสตร์ เช่น จากการตัดสินใจในการซื้อสินค้าในลักษณะส่วนบุคคลแทนลักษณะครัวเรือน และจำนวนที่เพิ่มขึ้นของผู้หญิงทำงาน การเกิดขึ้นของแนวคิดทางการตลาด และจำนวนที่เพิ่มขึ้นของผู้จัดการทางการตลาดที่สอดคล้องกับการที่หลายองค์กรในหลายรูปแบบได้ให้เล็งเห็นถึงความสำคัญถึงกิจกรรมทางการตลาดมากขึ้น

## INTRODUCTION

In *Marketing Behavior and Executive Action (MBEA) (1957)*, Alderson rejected the standard economic theory and sought to build a marketing theory from a new perspective. The title, *MBEA*, describes his approach in writing this book. The basic theme of *MBEA* was problem solving in marketing, which he regarded as a function of organized behavior systems. He stated that behavior systems functioned as if they were pursuing inherent goals or survival growth, although it was recognized that the vital urge

apparent in the system rested on the expectations of individuals who participated in its activities in an effort to realize their own objectives.

*MBEA* has three major parts. The first part deals with marketing's place in the behavioral sciences, starting with a discussion of philosophy of science and followed by justification for his use of a functionalism approach. The second part, the heart of the book, details his theory of market behavior. The final part covers his suggestions for what executives should act.

*MBEA* had a significant impact on marketing. In the 1950s, it was perceived as a breakthrough marketing literature (Shaw & Jones, 2005). Bartels (1988, p. 178) even went so far as to state that “Alderson presented marketing in such a modern way that created a new pattern for considering marketing management”. However, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, *MBEA* has been almost entirely forgotten. Thus, this paper aims both to describe *MBEA*’s contribution to marketing and to provide reasons for its rise and fall in popularity.

### ***MBEA* as a Breakthrough Marketing Literature in 1950s**

*MBEA* constituted a breakthrough in marketing literature in the 1950s (Jones & Shaw, 2002). According to Bartels (1988, p. 238), “*MBEA* was regarded as the unquestionably most fully developed theoretical exposition of marketing up to that time”. *MBEA* ranked as the most cited marketing book in the pre-1960s (Robinson & Adler, 1987). This happened because *MBEA* represented the dramatic shifts that marketing thought was undergoing at that time, including the shifts from an emphasis on distribution to a marketing management orientation, from an economics to a behavioral sciences perspective, and from definition to theory building (Shaw, Lazer, & Pirog, 2007)

### **The Shift from Distribution to Marketing Management Orientation**

Distribution orientation was inherent in the three traditional schools of marketing thought—commodities, institutions, and functions—that had dominated the marketing discipline from the beginning of the 1900s to the mid-1950s (Bartels, 1988). The major contribution of the distribution orientation was to assert the economic and social value created through marketing activities. However, it had only a limited capacity to address more management-oriented problems. With the publication of *MBEA*, the distribution approach was almost completely abandoned; according to Bartels (1988, p. 178) “Alderson with one sweeping stroke created a new pattern for considering marketing when he wrote *MBEA*.” Shifting the unit of analysis from the market to an individual organization and a household provided the dynamic for the marketing management school of thought. The household perspective also contributed to the consumer/buyer behavior school of thought (Shaw & Jones, 2005, p. 257).

### **The Shift from Economics to Behavioral Sciences Perspective**

Prior to the publication of *MBEA*, economics was predominantly viewed as the appropriate theoretical underpinning for marketing. *MBEA*, in contrast, drew upon such varied fields as sociology, psychology, anthropology, and political science for the foundation of its theory development. Observing that most individual consumers or buyers are mem-

bers of small social units, Alderson shifted the discipline’s focus from the economic man to the social dynamic of household. He was, thus, one of the first of a new breed of academicians who broke free from considering pure microeconomics as the only basis for marketing thought and theory (Shaw, Lazer, & Pirog, 2007).

Alderson was uncomfortable with labeling marketing as a branch of applied economics. He felt that marketing went beyond economics, which tends to focus on price and quantity (both very important to marketing concepts) but neglects relationships with consumers as people. Therefore, he asserted that marketing should be elaborated and enriched based on ideas and concepts derived from an interdisciplinary approach.

After the publication of *MBEA*, an influx of researchers from sociology, psychology, anthropology, and political science enter the marketing discipline. Many subsequent marketing scholars developed theoretical models of consumer/buyer behavior (e.g., Nicosia, 1966; Howard & Sheth, 1969). By the early 1970s, many multidisciplinary books such as Holloway, Mittlstaedt, and Venkatesan’s *Consumer Research: Contemporary Research in Action* (1971) and Cohen’s *Behavioral Science Foundations of Consumer Behavior* (1972) had appeared. Furthermore, when the *Journal of Consumer Research* began publication in 1974, the multidisciplinary approach covering all aspects of the behavioral sciences was legitimized for the study of marketing.

### **The Shift from Definition to Theory Building**

*MBEA* was the outgrowth of Alderson and Cox’s (1948) article in the *Journal of Marketing*, “Toward a Theory of Marketing”. This article details a plan for developing a theory of marketing and outlines which theories could be borrowed from and adapted as starting points for Alderson’s general theory of marketing, the theory of market behavior. Alderson strongly rejected any separation of theory and practice. He recognized the necessity for theory to be informed by practice and practice to be informed by theory. The subtitle of *MBEA*, *A Functional Approach to Marketing Theory*, shows his approach in developing marketing theory. An emphasis on theory as a guide for practice was a recurrent theme throughout *MBEA*.

In Alderson’s view, marketing theorists should labor toward the creation of a general theory of marketing. Such a theory should be composed of a set of propositions which are consistent among themselves and relevant to the actual practice of marketing. These propositions, preferably in the form of mathematical statements, should form empirically testable hypotheses. Marketing theory needed to be based on marketing facts, he argued, if it was to have any practical value. However, an accumulation of marketing facts alone was an uncertain foundation for advancing knowledge and mastery of a field in the absence of a guiding theoretical structure.

Hunt supported Alderson's view by stating that "A theory is a systematically related set of statements, including some lawlike generalizations, that are empirically testable...The purpose of theory is to increase scientific understanding through a systematized structure capable of both explaining and predicting phenomenon" (Hunt, 1983a, p. 228). Furthermore, his renowned article "General Theories and the Fundamental Explananda of Marketing" (Hunt, 1983b) supported Alderson's contention of the important role theory building had to play in marketing. In this article, Hunt focused on answering the question, "Is a general theory of marketing possible?" and concluded that "Although we are not close to developing a general theory of marketing at this time, progress is being made." This raises two questions: (1) why has there been so little significant progress since that time? (2) Is it possible to develop marketing theories and principles that meet scientific standards?

### **MBEA's Contributions to Marketing Alderson's Functionalism**

Alderson (1957) stated that, "*functionalism* is that approach to science, which begins by identifying some system of action and then tries to determine how and why it works as it does. Functionalism stresses the whole system and undertakes to interpret the parts in terms of how they serve the system" (Alderson, 1957, p.16).

Alderson asserted that functionalism was the most promising approach for theoretical development in marketing because it began with concepts which could be applied to all types of commodities and all types of firms that participate in marketing. Functionalists would identify the functions of marketing and show how these apply in one situation after another. Alderson believed that any comprehensive list of marketing functions, to be useful, had to be relevant to the groups of organized behavior systems engaged in marketing. Functional analysis could be used either for interpretation or in the solution of marketing problems. The emphasis of the functionalist approach on how things worked and what needed to be done in order to make them work better made it particularly useful in marketing because the study of marketing was primarily concerned with the solution of practical problems. As for methodology, the functionalist approach used a combination of empirical research techniques and deductive reasoning. The functionalist approach was also eclectic because it accepted whatever useful findings are unearthed in other sciences.

### The Concept of Differential Advantage

Alderson's functionalism was influenced by the theory of heterogeneous demand (Chamberlin, 1933), the theory of effective dynamic competition (Clark, 1940), and the system approach to the development of his theory of marketing. Extending Chamberlin's (1933) view that intra-industry demand is sub-

stantially heterogeneous, he asserted that the particular assortment of goods viewed as meaningful or desirable by any one household was likely to differ greatly from those of others. Thus, the macro-systems that he tried to explain were those that involved firms taking tangible resources in their natural state and transforming them into a variety of marketplace products. These various products would ultimately wind up as meaningful assortments of products in the hands of particular household members.

"Although firms aim to pursue profit, they do so as if they have a primary goal of survival" (Alderson, 1957, p. 54). The survival goal resulted from employers and employees believing that they could financial and non-financial rewards by working toward the survival of their firms. Thus, firm growth was sought based on the conviction that growth was necessary for survival. However, in a market-based economy, survival depended crucially on a firm's ability to compete with other firms in seeking the patronage of specific intermediate buyers and/or ultimately households.

A firm could be assured of the patronage of intermediate buyers only when buyers had reason to prefer its output over that of competing firms. Thus, each competing firm would seek advantages over other firms to assure the patronage of some groups of intermediate buyers. Alderson (1957) called this concept "competition for differential advantage" (p. 101). He identified six bases of differential advantage for manufacturing firms, including market segmentation, selection appeals, transvection, product improvement, process improvement, and product innovation.

### The Concept of Marketing Organization

Alderson's functionalism emphasized understanding the sociology of marketing and how firms are organized. In other words, he tried to identify the nature of the firm's internal organizational structure. In modern terms, this concept may be designated *internal marketing*, which is not mentioned much in the marketing literature. Alderson argued that a firm's structure was related to the functions it performed. In order for a firm to perform its economic activities, it had to have appropriate relational structures including communication, operation, power, and control. Its internal functions needed to be understood explicitly.

This implies that in order to survive and grow, each firm should emphasize the making of strategic decisions affecting not only external marketing but also internal marketing. In other words, the better a firm's marketing organization structure is, the better its ability to implement marketing strategies will be.

### The Concept of Consumer Behavior

Alderson's functionalism assumed that consumers were problem-solvers with limited resources in terms of time and information faced with the decisions

need to make choices among various alternatives. Alderson adopted the principle of diminishing marginal utility by stating that “there is a gradual decline in the amount of principle of diminishing of value or satisfaction which can be anticipated from each additional unit” (1957, p. 231). He also attempted to seek a balance in assortment by stating that “the last unit of each supply makes the same contribution to the potency of the assortment” (1957, p. 210).

This shows that his concept of consumer behavior was consistent with microeconomics and assumed that consumers were rational decision-makers seeking to maximize their utility. However, his concept of consumer behavior goes beyond microeconomics and positioned consumers as learners and problem-solvers searching for information and comparing alternatives to reduce uncertainty in a dynamic fashion (Tamila, 2007).

He also proposed the concept of *hedonomics*, which was to be a field of inquiry in which consumers sought product enjoyment as part of their consumption experiences. He used the term *hedonomics* to show that consumers felt pleasure when they consumed products. Consumption satisfaction from purchasing was not only purposeful but was also rewarded for its own sake. This led the study of marketing go beyond the purchase of products into the study of consumption and satisfaction formation, at a time when buyer behavior was limited to the purchase (Tamila, 2007).

### **Alderson’s Theory of Market Behavior**

In the development of his theory of market behavior, Alderson adopted an ecological frame of reference, rather than an economic point of view, and drew heavily on psychology, sociology, and anthropology. He viewed marketing as organized behavior systems. He emphasized the successive sorting transformations that were needed to match the variety of goods produced by different firms with the heterogeneous product requirements of different consumers. Thus, his theory of market behavior employed the following three concepts: organized behavior systems, heterogeneous markets, and sorting functions.

### **Alderson’s Concept of Organized Behavior Systems**

Alderson defined an organized behavior system as an ecological system composed of a group taken in conjunction with the environment in which it functioned. A group might be comprised of individuals in a household, a number of people in a business firm, or a number of business firms. The unique characteristic of an ecological system was the relations among its members. Each participant of an ecological system occupied a certain status in relation to other participants and tended to react in accordance with the general processes of the system; however, there was still opportunity for independent action. Status linked each participant to the system

and forms the basis for expectations about participation in its activities.

According to Alderson, systems did not have goals separate from those of individual participants. Instead, systems were considered the means of expressing and realizing the aims of the participants who made up the association. In other words, systems reflected the aims of their participants, and they came into being and persisted as long as participants were satisfying individual goals.

### **Alderson’s Concept of Heterogeneous Markets**

In contrast to the economic theory of perfect competition, which assumes homogeneous markets, Alderson asserted that both the supply and the demand side of markets were heterogeneous.

#### Heterogeneous Demand

On the demand side, the household was considered the most basic behavior system. Each household accumulated products to sustain behavior patterns. Alderson assumed that the product requirements of each household were different. Also, in an industrial society, all products were necessary to create and replenish the assortments of products desired by all households. Thus, each household entered into the market as a problem-solver seeking a unique assortment of products required to support expected patterns of behavior.

#### Heterogeneous Supply

On the supply side, the behavior of sellers was interpreted as an effort to adjust to differences in product requirements among consumers. Sellers would constantly seek to establish a competitive advantage by differentiating their products, services, locations, or some combination of the foregoing from these of their competitors. In cases where sellers were successful, each seller would occupy a unique position and stratify some particular segment of demand. The dynamic of competition resulted in a continuous search for differential advantage.

#### Roles of Information

Alderson saw information as the means of clearing heterogeneous markets. Prices were treated as one part of the information flow needed to clear markets. In other words, a market would be cleared by information, not by price adjustments in supply and demand conditions as assumed by economics. Alderson attributed market imperfections to a failure in information flow between buyers and sellers. Sellers were not always able to find buyers for their products, and buyers could not always identify where sellers were. As a result, some products were left unsold, and some needs remained unfulfilled. He, thus, believed that this mismatch could be corrected by appropriate information.

Since information requirements vary from one selling situation to another and communication channels have restricted capacity, the questions of

deciding how much information is sufficient and of determining the best methods for transmitting this information efficiently would always come up.

### **Alderson's Concept of Sorting Functions**

The purpose of marketing is to match segments of supply and demand. Alderson asserted that this end could be achieved by successive sorting transformations to align heterogeneous segments of supply with appropriate segments of demand.

#### Searching and Sorting

Alderson defined *searching* as a form of pre-sorting, which would not necessarily result in the physical movement of goods. The purpose of searching was to locate products that fell into specified categories. It might require considerable effort, but it was primarily concerned with information and was basically a mental activity.

On the other hand, *sorting* was seen as a physical process that once completed, could not be reversed without risk of some loss. In any market, marketing middlemen served as specialists in sorting. Sorting included both the decisions that firms made in assembling products for the market and the choices that consumers made in selecting goods to satisfy their needs. Alderson termed this process *double sorting* because it involved both sellers searching for buyers and buyers searching for products.

Alderson identified four types of sorting. *Sorting-out* was a process in which a collection was broken into various types of goods. *Accumulation* was a process in which small homogeneous supplies were added together to create larger supplies. *Allocation* was a process by which homogeneous supplies were broken down into smaller quantities. *Assorting* was the process in which unlike supplies are put together with some pattern determined by demand.

#### Transactions and Transvections

Aldersonian *transactions* were agreements concerning the exchange of goods that resulted from the double sorting process. They reflected joint decisions in which buyers agreed to take the products offered and sellers agreed to supply products at stated prices. Transactions could be divided into fully negotiated transactions and routine transactions. Fully negotiated transactions were either large transactions or controlling transactions that defined the framework within which a number of subsequent future transactions would take place. These subsequent transactions were referred to as routine transactions. Every transaction involved an exchange. An exchange between  $x$  and  $y$  took place if and only if  $x$  was different from  $y$  and if each of the parties to the exchange ended up with assortments of higher utility as a result of the exchange.

Alderson defined *transvection* as a unit of action by which a single end-product was placed in the hands of the consumer after moving from the original materials in natural state through all the intermediate sorts and transformations. In other words, a transvection was the outcome of a series of transactions, sorts, and transformations that created meaningful heterogeneity from meaningless heterogeneity. Alderson argued that, rather than matching buyers and sellers who were in immediate contact, it matched an original producer and an ultimate consumer through a series of sorts and transformations. Transvections had attained the optimal number of steps if costs could not be decreased by an increase or a decrease in the number of sorts and transformations involved in the transvections.

### **MBEA as a Forgotten Marketing Literature in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

#### **The Emergence of the 4Ps Paradigm in Marketing Education**

The marketing mix or the *4Ps* –product, price, place, and promotion–was introduced by Jerome McCarthy in 1960. Shortly after the publication of McCarthy's *Basic Marketing: Managerial Approach* (1960), the 4Ps paradigm was rapidly adopted as the organizing structure for virtually all introductory marketing textbooks for undergraduate students (Yudelson, 1999). Thus, within a decade after the emergence of the 4Ps paradigm in marketing education, *MBEA*, which was grounded in the functionalism approach, together with other books grounded in other earlier approaches–commodities, institutions, and functions–were hardly recognized and went out of print (Shaw & Jones, 2005). This was due to the fact that “Despite one’s lack of prior training in subject area, the 4Ps approach made it a lot easier for anyone to learn and teach marketing within a relatively short period of time” (Tamila, 2007, p. 13).

Additionally, *MBEA* was itself difficult to read, and few students could clearly understand its contents (Sheth, Garder, & Garrett, 1988). Furthermore, it lacked visual appeals with no color, few tables, and no study questions and exercises at the ends of chapters, which are generally necessary for helping students better understand a textbook’s contents. Although *MBEA* seems suitable for serious marketing students, particularly doctoral students, Kurtz (1997) has found that only a few universities are still offering courses in marketing theory and thought. As education plays an important role in the transmission of marketing knowledge from one generation to the next, this fact helps to explain why *MBEA* has been largely forgotten by contemporary marketing theorists.

### **The Important Role of Empirical Testability**

According to Hunt (1983a), marketing theory has three components: systematically related themes, lawlike generalizations, and empirical testability. The first two of these components are fundamental criteria for any scientific explanation. That is, phenomena cannot be viewed in isolation and must be considered within a framework of broader and interconnected variables. Hunt (1983) stated that “the justification for the final component of empirical testability is that any systematized structure is not empirically testable will suffer from explanatory and predictive impotence” (p. 243).

During the past few decades, very few researchers have taken Alderson’s functionalism-propositions in *MBEA* and empirically tested and verified them (Peterson, 2005; Mentzer & Schumann 2006) constitute welcome exceptions to this lack of empirical attention. This may lead researchers to suspect that Alderson’s theories in *MBEA* lack the third component of marketing theory, empirical testability (or justification). And this may be another factor explaining why *MBEA* is today, rarely mentioned as a significant contribution to the development of marketing theory and thought.

### **The Changes in Demographics**

Alderson’s functionalism to consumer motivation viewed the structure and functions of a household as the deciding factors in consumer buying behavior. His emphasis on the household led him to believe that a household’s buying behavior and that of an individual family member were the same. However, more recent research demonstrates that, family and individual product choices and decisions cannot be treated as equivalent. Thus, consumer research today is focusing more on the individual consumer as a unit of analysis rather than household.

Alderson failed to recognize the impact of demographics. Shortly after the publication of *MBEA*, significant changes in the structure of households occurred such as an increase in the number one-person households (single people) and significant growth in the number of working women. The increasing divorce rate together with feminism resulted in a dramatic decrease in the major role of the traditional housewife as the only purchasing person in an entire household. Furthermore, children and teenagers, who have no income but spend lots of money, are playing an increasingly important role in buying products and services. Thus, the rationale behind Alderson’s theory of buying behaviors strikes many contemporary marketing researchers as inappropriate and unacceptable.

### **The Advent of Marketing Concept and the Increasing Number of Professional Marketing Managers**

Marketing concept has been broadened, extended, and redefined (Foxall, 1989). The American Marketing Association (AMA) currently defines mar-

keting as “the activity, conducted by organizations and individuals, that operates through a set of institutions and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging market offerings that have value for customers, clients, marketers, and society at large” (AMA, 2007). It can be seen that this definition emphasizes applied management (or a managerial perspective). This causes in response to the increasing number of professional marketing managers. It is very useful for them because it helps them to articulate the essence of marketing in the organizational setting, which is contrasted with the esoteric definitions from earlier years in the development of marketing thought (Morgan, 1996).

Although, the contents of *MBEA* focused on the managerial perspective and marketing science, its major objective was the development of a general theory of marketing. In other words, it focused more on theory development than on the techniques to be used in analyzing data. This contrasts with the objectives of professional marketing managers who prefer research with practical applicability over purely theoretical contributions. This is due to the fact that their major responsibility is to solve specific marketing problems and/or develop marketing strategies, which sometimes require sophisticated statistical techniques (e.g., supply chain management models and consumer decision models).

### **CONCLUSION**

*MBEA* constituted a breakthrough in marketing literature in the 1950s, because by studying practical problems, Alderson shifted the focus of marketing thought from distribution to marketing management. He also expanded the foundations of the discipline from economics to a broader perspective in the behavioral sciences. Finally, his functionalism approach to the study of marketing shifted the focus from description to theory building. The major contributions of *MBEA* include Alderson’s functionalism and his theory of market behavior. However, *MBEA* has been forgotten since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The reasons for this are the emergence of the 4Ps paradigm in marketing education, the important role of empirical testability, the change in demographics, and the advent of marketing concept and the increasing number of professional marketing managers. Due to the various contributions to marketing theory and thought mentioned earlier in this paper, it is agreed that *MBEA* contains enough good materials that it deserves increased attention, particularly for marketing theorists.

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