

USING PARABLES TO TEACH MARKETING

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ABSTRACT

A simple story told through a parable can be an effective pedagogical tool for teaching important marketing concepts, ideas, and lessons. By using parables that describe characters, situations, and images that are familiar and easy to understand, students can easily generalize from what is already known to that which is new and novel. This article discusses the theoretical and practical basis for teaching marketing with parables, describes a procedure for using parables in a marketing class within the context of a cooperative learning exercise, outlines a five-step procedure for writing parables to teach important marketing concepts and lessons, and presents four specific parables that can be used in a marketing principles class. Each parable illustrated in this article is a short story about an everyday life experience with which students are familiar.

INTRODUCTION

Marketing educators are continually looking for new teaching techniques, approaches, and methodologies to improve student learning. Interestingly, one of the most effective teaching techniques is also one of the oldest. People have used stories as a teaching tool since the beginning of time. Stories, fables, and parables have been used to effectively pass on history and important information to younger generations (Bucher 1991; Frankel 1992; Kirkwood 1983). A parable is defined as a simple story about everyday events and characters that illustrates a moral, religious truth, or important life lesson. Similarly, a fable is defined as a fictitious story, often with animal characters, that teaches a lesson.

Stories and parables can also be used to teach marketing. A simple story told through a parable can be an effective pedagogical tool for teaching important marketing and business concepts, ideas, and lessons. A distinct advantage that parables have as pedagogical tools is their ability to illustrate concepts that are often hard to understand by describing characters, situations, and images that are easy to understand. By using everyday events as part of a story, students can easily create mental pictures of the people and situations described in the story. These mental pictures help the reader understand the story and the lessons being conveyed through the story. As such, they allow the reader (or listener) to learn new ideas by generalizing from what is familiar, already known, and already understood, to that which is new and novel. In this way, parables are very effective tools for teaching the *big picture* concepts, ideas, lessons, and rules of marketing that might not be well articulated, described, or emphasized in a textbook.

The purpose of this article is to (1) discuss the theoretical and practical basis for teaching marketing with parables, (2) describe a procedure for using parables in a marketing class within the context of a cooperative learning exercise, (3) outline a five-step procedure for

writing parables to teach important marketing concepts and lessons, and (4) present four specific parables that can be used in a marketing principles class. Each parable illustrated in this article is a short story about an everyday life experience with which students are familiar.

Within the context of a cooperative learning exercise to be conducted during a class session, students first read the parable and try to visualize the characters and events described in the story. They then engage in a brief cooperative learning exercise called *think, pair, share*. To guide students through the exercise, they are provided with a series of questions which they are to answer on their own (this is the *think* part of the exercise). Then, they discuss their answers with the student seated next to them (*pair*). After coming to some agreement regarding answers to the questions and the possible moral or lesson of the parable, each pair *shares* their answers and interpretations of the parable with the rest of the class. The procedure for teaching with parables outlined in this article can be used equally well in either small or large introductory marketing classes, as well as senior level marketing management classes, and even graduate level marketing courses.

Using parables within the context of this cooperative learning exercise is an excellent way to introduce vague and hard to grasp concepts. Because the parables deal with everyday experiences with which they are familiar, students have a base of understanding that they can apply to a marketing context. In addition, the everyday nature of parables makes them easier to remember, thus providing a memory aid for key concepts in marketing.

PARABLES AND LEARNING EXPERIENCES BEYOND THE TEXTBOOK

A typical Principles of Marketing class can easily become bogged down with a multitude of terms and definitions, where the instructor falls into a pattern of presenting a new marketing term and then defining it for

students. This is followed by another term or concept, which is then defined for students. Unfortunately, this can become rather boring for both the instructor and students. There is no active participation on the part of students, and students are not allowed to discover new ideas and concepts on their own. As such, students quickly forget the multitude of terms and definitions they learn in their classes. Many marketing educators seek to give students unique learning experiences in their classes that go beyond merely presenting material from a textbook. Parables provide such experiences for both students and teachers.

Parables provide a means by which instructors can create an environment where students actively and cooperatively learn the important lessons of marketing and business. And, because they are being taught through the use of parables that draw on students' knowledge of the familiar and well known, the lessons that are learned from parables can be easily remembered.

Parables are very effective at teaching the *big picture* lessons of life (Jarollimek 1991; Kirkwood 1985; Schank 1990; Zull 2002). For example, the story of the ant and the grasshopper effectively teaches that one should always be prepared.

The Ant and the Grasshopper

In a field one summer's day a Grasshopper was hopping about, chirping and singing to its heart's content. An Ant passed by, bearing along with great toil an ear of corn he was taking to the nest. "Why not come and chat with me," said the Grasshopper, "instead of toiling and mowing in that way?" "I am helping to lay up food for the winter," said the Ant, "and recommend you to do the same." "Why bother about winter?" said the Grasshopper; "we have got plenty of food at present." But the Ant went on its way and continued its toil. When the winter came the Grasshopper had no food and found itself dying of hunger, while it saw the ants distributing every day corn and grain from the stores they had collected in the summer. Then the Grasshopper knew: It is best to prepare for the days of necessity.

An important benefit of teaching with parables is that they are easy to remember and they often serve as shorthand ways of conveying meaning about an important message. For instance, all that a parent must do is mention *The Boy Who Cried Wolf*, and children quickly know that their parents are reminding them about the negative consequences of lying. Similarly, most people can quickly recall the lessons that are taught from the story of *The Ugly Duckling*, the story of *The Tortoise and the Hare*, and the story of *The Little Engine that Could*.

THE THEORETICAL BASIS FOR TEACHING WITH PARABLES AND STORIES

There is strong theoretical support for using parables and stories to improve teaching and student learning

(Bucher 1991; Frankel 1992; Jarollimek 1991; Kirkwood 1983). Stories are one of the oldest pedagogical techniques – dating back thousands of years. The Bible makes very effective use of parables and short stories to convey important lessons. Similarly, Aesop's fables are well known for their ability to convey important lessons in short stories.

The effectiveness of parables and stories as pedagogical techniques has also been studied within the context of cognitive psychology. Recalling and creating stories are key parts of learning (Schank 1990). Parables are powerful means of teaching concepts because they provide a mental structure for new knowledge. The mental structure (knowledge schema) activated by the characters, situations, and events described in the story provides a base for understanding and making sense of new concepts and ideas. Parables and stories are incredibly valuable teaching tools because they allow students to activate and engage multiple parts of the brain.

Stories engage all parts of the brain. They come from our experiences, our memories, our ideas, our actions, and our feelings. They allow us to package events and knowledge in complex neural nets, any part of which can trigger all the others. And stories are about movement. They are about verbs, the action! They focus on good and bad actions, so they generate fear and pleasure, and all the derivative emotions (Zull 2002, p. 228).

TEACHING MARKETING WITH PARABLES

It is relatively easy to teach marketing with parables. A simple five-step procedure for using parables to teach marketing is outlined below.

1. Read the parable.
2. Visualize the story and the characters.
3. Answer the guided questions individually (*Think*).
4. Work with another student to answer the guided questions (*Pair*).
5. Share answers with other classmates and reflect on the lesson(s) that are learned from the parable (*Share*).

1. Read the Parable

To illustrate this five-step procedure, consider the parable of the field goals below.

The Parable of the Field Goals

This year the Big State University (BSU) football team lost the big game to their main rival, Little State University (LSU). BSU appeared to be the better team, but they missed all four of their field goal attempts. They lost the game by two points, so making only one of their four field goal attempts would have given them the victory. This game high-

lighted a year of frustration – making only 20 percent of all field goal attempts during the entire season.

The BSU coach quickly decided to deny the field goal kicker his scholarship for the next year. After hearing this, the university President quickly fired the football coach. When asked why he fired the coach, the President replied, “He clearly doesn’t understand football.”

This parable can be presented individually to students prior to a class session, or it can be shown to the entire class.

2. Visualize the Story and Characters

After reading the parable, students are first asked to take one minute to visualize the story and the characters. They should try to paint a mental picture of the story in their mind’s eye. Visualizing the parable makes it more meaningful. The visualization process also provides an additional memory trace to help students retain the important lessons they are learning from the parable (Harney 2000).

3. Answer the Guided Questions Individually (Think)

After visualizing the story, students are presented with a number of guided questions that they are to answer on their own. Guided questions for the parable of the field goals are shown below.

Guided questions (Parable of the Field Goals):

- ◆ *What is it about football that the coach does not understand?*
- ◆ *Other than the kicker, what are some other potential reasons (causes) for BSU’s inability to make field goals?*
- ◆ *Is kicking a field goal in football a simple task?*
- ◆ *What must go right to be able to successfully kick a field goal?*
- ◆ *Kicking a field goal is _____*
- ◆ *Marketing is _____*
- ◆ *What is the overall moral or lesson of this parable as it relates to marketing?*

Students should be given three to five minutes to answer these questions. These guided questions help students learn on their own how this story can teach an important lesson about marketing.

4. Pair With another Student to Answer the Guided Questions

After answering the guided questions on their own, students pair with another student to come to some agreement about their answers and the potential moral of the parable. Using parables within the context of a coop-

erative learning exercise where student share their ideas, thoughts, and opinions can significantly enhance student learning (Bobbitt, Inks, Kemp, and Mayo 2000; Graeff 1997; Graham, Graham, and Whiting 1997; Hernandez 2002; Lancaster and Strand 2001; Leon and Tai 2004; Norman, Rose, and Lehman 2004; Siciliano 2001; Wehrs 2002). Using this type of cooperative learning exercise improves student learning in a number of ways, including:

- ◆ It provides a break for students.
- ◆ It lets students generate their own morals and concepts from the parable. By working together students are actively discovering the moral or lesson of the story. This is a much more powerful way to learn than merely listening passively to a lecture.
- ◆ It lets students learn from each other’s experiences and knowledge.
- ◆ It provides students with ownership of their learning when they actively discover the moral or lesson of the story (Wood 2003).
- ◆ It makes the lesson more memorable.

5. Share Answers with the Entire Class

After working in pairs, students share their interpretation of the story and the possible lessons from the story with the rest of the class. The entire class reaches a consensus regarding the important lesson(s) that the story teaches about marketing. For example, the parable of the field goals teaches students that marketing is a multi-stage process – much like kicking a field goal in football. There are many stages in the process that must be completed, integrated, and coordinated to successfully kick a field goal. The long snapper must be accurate. The holder must be able to catch the ball from the snapper and place it correctly on the ground. The kicker must be able to kick the ball between the uprights. And, the offensive line must be able to block the oncoming rushers from the other team to keep them from blocking the kick. A breakdown in any one of these stages can lead to an unsuccessful field goal attempt. Similarly, marketing is a multi-stage process. Many stages (functions, activities) must be completed, integrated, and coordinated to successfully design, produce, promote, and distribute a product from a producer to a consumer. These stages include product design and development, production, distribution, pricing, advertising, selling, and even after-the-sale customer support. A break down in any one of the marketing stages can lead to an unsuccessful sale, unsatisfied customers, decreased customer satisfaction, and decreased repeat purchases.

The moral of the parable of field goals:

- ◆ *The coach does not seem to understand that kicking a field goal is actually a multi-stage process that relies on the successful completion*

of tasks by many players on the team, not just the kicker.

- ◆ *There are many things that must go right to be able to successfully kick a field goal. Kicking a field goal is actually a complicated process that requires integration and cooperation among many team members. The long snapper must be accurate, the holder must be skilled enough to receive the snap and place the ball in a correct position for the kicker to be able to kick the ball through the uprights. All of this must be done while the offensive line is blocking the opposing team from blocking the kick. In addition, the offense must be able to move down the field far enough so that the kicker has a reasonable chance of making a field goal (i.e., a kicker would not be expected to make any field goals being kicked from the 50-yard line).*
- ◆ *Similarly, marketing is a process that requires the integration and cooperation of many marketing related functions. This is illustrated in multi-stage models of the consumer adoption processes (e.g., awareness – interest – trial – evaluation – desire – adoption).*
- ◆ *All marketing communications must be integrated to achieve a common goal (Integrated Marketing Communications – IMC).*
- ◆ *The four elements of the market mix must “fit” with each other.*

This parable can be used at the very beginning of the semester to provide students with a sense of structure regarding marketing as a process and not a singular activity to be performed by an individual. Marketing is an organizational activity that must be understood by all employees – from the sales person, to the administrative assistant receiving customers’ phone calls. It can also be used when introducing the marketing mix, as well as when discussing integrated marketing communications (IMC) and multi-stage models of product adoption. Because parables often lend themselves to multiple interpretations, they allow the instructor to use them at various times during the semester.

BENEFITS OF TEACHING WITH PARABLES

Parables are very effective at teaching rather abstract, yet very important, lessons of life dealing with such issues as relationships, loyalty, promises, motivation, trust, power in relationships, and influence over others. This is exactly what makes using parables so effective for teaching marketing. Often, the most essential lessons to be learned about marketing and business deal with these very same issues. For example:

- ◆ **Relationships** – Attracting, creating, and maintaining relationships with customers, suppliers, buyers, and channel members.

- ◆ **Loyalty** – Customer loyalty and differing (competing) loyalty goals among channel members.
- ◆ **Promises** – Branding. A brand is a promise. Do not sell what you cannot deliver.
- ◆ **Motivation** – Purchase motivation and persuasion.
- ◆ **Trust** – Deceptive advertising and product claims.
- ◆ **Power in relationships** – Channels of distribution and influence over channel members.

Unfortunately, many marketing textbooks do not present these *big picture* lessons in an interesting, engaging, and interactive manner. Using parables to teach marketing gives the instructor a chance to give students a learning experience they cannot get from just the textbook.

Other important advantages of using parables to teach marketing include:

- ◆ They are novel. Students do not do this type of exercise in their other classes.
- ◆ Students enjoy working with these parables and trying to guess the moral. It can almost become a game to students – Guess the Moral.
- ◆ They work! Parables and stories are very effective means of helping students learn important lessons about marketing.
- ◆ Parables are not a one-and-done exercise. Different parables can be used throughout the semester for a variety of topics (e.g., promotions, channels of distribution, coupons, etc.).
- ◆ Using parables teaches students that they can apply lessons from everyday life to help them make business and marketing decisions and to better understand business and marketing.

THE FIVE STEPS TO WRITING PARABLES TO TEACH MARKETING

Writing parables that can be used to help teach important concepts in marketing is not difficult. In fact, they can be easily written using a simple five step process.

Step 1. What Do You Want Students to Learn?

Identify the important point, concept, idea, lesson, or rule of marketing that you want students to learn. Do not concentrate on terms or definitions. Instead, think of the lesson to be learned in somewhat abstract or general terms. For example, consider the following lesson that you might want to teach students:

Do not sell the product. Simply sell the idea that other consumers are buying it.

This is something that students should learn from a marketing principles class. In fact, students have probably already noticed that many advertisements do not try

to persuade consumers on the features or benefits of the product. Rather, they merely suggest that many other consumers are buying it; therefore, it must be good. We often see advertising slogans such as: “Number one selling car in America – five years in a row.” “Most prescribed migraine medication by doctors.” “More consumers buy from Haverty’s than from any other furniture retailer in the state.”

Step 2. When Do You Want Students to Learn This?

Identify the course topics that this lesson relates to. At what point during the course do you want students to learn this lesson? For example, the lesson – *do not sell the product, simply sell the idea that other consumers are buying it* – could be taught when discussing:

- ◆ Social influences on consumers.
- ◆ The role of reference group influences on consumer decision making processes.
- ◆ Advertising and types of advertising claims.
- ◆ Theories of persuasion.

Step 3. Tell a Story

Write a parable or short story that illustrates the overall lesson without using marketing language, terms, or examples. Make the story vague enough to allow for your interpretation as well as students’ interpretations. Try to tell a story with which most students will be familiar. In this case, the way children try to influence their parents provides for an excellent means by which this lesson can be conveyed. Children often use arguments such as, “But Mommy, why can’t I go to the creek to play, all of the other kids are going to be there.” Then write a story that describes this type of situation. The parable of the buzz cut is an example.

The Parable of the Buzz Cut

Alex is in the 5th grade. Many of the other boys in his class have had their hair cut very short. The boys called it a “buzz cut.” Alex wanted to get a buzz cut too. When he asked his mother she told him that she did not want him to cut his hair that short and that he probably would not look very good with a buzz cut. Determined, he told his mother, “But Mom, all of the other boys have a buzz cut, so their mothers said it was OK.” A few days later, Alex was seen at school with a buzz cut.

Step 4. Guide Students’ Learning Process

Write some guided questions that will help students work through the parable to identify the key lessons and ideas conveyed by the story. Without spoon-feeding them too much, let students discover and learn the key concepts on their own. Let them try to articulate the moral of the story and then identify its relevance to marketing.

- ◆ *What does Alex understand about persuasion?*
- ◆ *Did Alex try to convince his mother about the merits, or benefits of getting a buzz cut?*
- ◆ *What did Alex tell his mother?*
- ◆ *What finally convinced his mother to let Alex get a buzz cut?*
- ◆ *What lessons can marketers learn from the techniques young children use to persuade their parents?*
- ◆ *What can this teach us about how we promote and advertise products such as cars, prescription drugs, and pharmaceuticals?*
- ◆ *Must marketers sell products by selling the product?*
- ◆ *If not, what can marketers sell?*
- ◆ *What can marketers emphasize in their promotions to consumers?*
- ◆ *Don’t sell the product, sell _____.*

Step 5. Discuss With Students What They Just Learned

After students have identified the moral of the parable, help them articulate the moral of the parable as it relates to marketing. Summarize the main points and emphasize the general lesson that you want students to learn from the exercise. For example, discuss the following key points being illustrated by the story:

- ◆ *The use of reference group influence and referent group power can be very persuasive in marketing.*
- ◆ *Marketers do not always sell the product by selling the product. Rather, they can sell the product by simply selling the idea that everyone else is buying it.*
- ◆ *Advertising slogans such as, “Number One Selling Car for the Past Five Years,” or “Most Prescribed Pain Reliever” can be very persuasive.*

ADDITIONAL PARABLES

To further illustrate the effectiveness of parables to teach important lessons about marketing and business, two additional parables (along with guided questions) are provided below.

The Parable of Bill, Ted, and Alice

Bill and Alice have been dating for about six months. Bill’s friend, Ted, is introduced to Alice. Ted is very attracted to Alice. He romances her, sweet-talks her, seduces her and “steals” her away from Bill. Ted is very pleased with himself because stealing Alice was relatively easy. Ted thinks he must be something special to be able to steal Alice away from Bill so easily. Ted plans on having a life-long relationship with Alice. He plans to ask Alice to marry him.

Guided Questions

- ◆ What is your advice to Ted?
- ◆ What is your advice to Bill?
- ◆ What is your advice to Alice?
- ◆ Is it a good idea to try to “steal away” a girlfriend (boyfriend) from someone else?
- ◆ How would you describe a person like Alice who easily or often switches boyfriends?
- ◆ Would you want a girlfriend like Alice? Why? Why not?
- ◆ Do marketers want customers who are like Alice? Why? Why not?
- ◆ What kind of customers do marketers want?
- ◆ Is targeting brand switchers a good strategy for long-term marketing success?
- ◆ What is the overall moral or lesson of this story?
- ◆ In this story, identify which character illustrates a (1) market leader, (2) market challenger, and (3) consumer:

The Moral of the Parable of Bill, Ted, and Alice

- ◆ Ted should not plan on a long-term relationship with Alice because, “If she did it to him, she will do it to you.”
- ◆ It is best to find a loyal girlfriend/boyfriend.
- ◆ Marketers cannot rely on brand switchers as an effective strategy for long term growth.
- ◆ Marketers seek and need customers who are brand loyal.
- ◆ Marketing strategies will depend upon a firm’s competitive position – market leader, market challenger, market follower, or market niche.
- ◆ Bill = market leader, Ted = market challenger, Alice = consumer

Many students will be able to relate to this parable and its lessons because they have had firsthand experience with someone like either Ted or Alice. And that is exactly what makes it such a powerful teaching and learning tool. The connection to one’s personal experiences makes the parable and its lessons even more relevant, meaningful and memorable.

The Parable of the Peach Picker

In a town lived a wealthy land owner. He owned the only fruit orchards for miles and miles. When it came time to harvest the fruit, the harvesters were instructed to pick only the choicest and best fruits to be sold. Not long after the harvest three men were walking by the fruit orchards. Upon seeing that there were still many apples and peaches on the trees they asked the land owner if they could pick the remaining fruit. The land owner agreed, telling them that they could keep any and all fruit they could pick. As they entered the orchard all three of them noticed that there were many more apples than peaches left to be picked. So, the first man, being the fastest and strongest ran to the apple trees and began picking the apples. Not long after, the second man arrived in

the apple orchard and confronted the first man. The second man said that he wanted the apples and claimed that all of the apples were to be his. The two men soon began to fight. They fought viciously all day. Bruised and beaten, they both limped back home, too weary to carry any fruit. On their way home they saw the third man standing under a sign that read: Peaches for sale. Last chance! Only freshly picked peaches in town!

Guided Questions

- ◆ Why did the first man run to the apple orchard?
- ◆ Why did the second man also run to the apple orchard?
- ◆ Why did the third man go to the peach orchard?
- ◆ What is better, a few peaches, or no apples?
- ◆ If you were one of these three men, which orchard would you choose? Why?
- ◆ What is the overall moral or lesson of this parable?
- ◆ Rule of order: Be _____
- ◆ If you cannot be first at one thing, be _____ (Better?)

The Moral of the Parable of the Peach Picker

- ◆ It is better to capture what you can than to fight over what you might not get.
- ◆ Do not always strive for the largest market; strive for the market that you can dominate.
- ◆ Rule of Order: Be first. If you cannot be first in one field (market), be first in a different field (market).
- ◆ Develop marketing strategies that will deter competition.
- ◆ Strive for ways to identify markets with little competition, or develop methods for deterring competition.
- ◆ 2nd place is the first loser.
- ◆ If you were not first, you never will be.
- ◆ Many people will say that it is better to be lucky than good. Successful marketers know that it is often better to be first than better.

When discussing this parable and its lessons, ask students to identify who was the first person to fly across the Atlantic Ocean. Then ask them to identify the second man to fly across the Atlantic Ocean. Most students will correctly identify Charles Linbergh as the first person to successfully make the flight in his plane named the *Spirit of St. Louis*. However, very few students will know that Bert Hinkler was the second man to do it. In fact, Bert Hinkler made the flight in less time and used less fuel than Charles Linbergh used. As such, he performed the task better than Linbergh. However, because he was not first, history gives him very little consideration for his accomplishment. Then ask students who was the first woman to make the same flight. They will probably be able to identify Amelia Earhart. Why can they remember her, but not Bert Hinkler? The answer is that she was the first

woman to make the flight. Because she was the first in a different category (first woman vs. first person), history remembers her (Ries and Trout 1994). History usually remembers the first, not the best.

CONCLUSION

As marketing educators seek new teaching techniques, approaches, and methodologies to improve student learning, it is ironic that one of the best pedagogical techniques is also one of the world's oldest. Even though parables and stories have been used for educational

purposes since the beginning of time, they can still be used to effectively teach students important concepts and lessons about marketing in today's business environment. Perhaps the greatest benefit to using parables to teach marketing is their ability to illustrate concepts and lessons that are often hard to understand by describing characters, situations and images that are familiar and easy to understand. They allow students to learn new ideas by generalizing from what is familiar, already known, and already understood, to that which is new and novel.

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