SIDNEY J. LEVY ON MARKETING: An Intellectual Biography

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Introduction

Sidney Levy is a prolific, seminal, internationally-recognized, award-winning scholar. His ideas began to influence marketing executives in the late 1940s and today impact how we think about marketing's role in management, how managers develop products and brands, how they understand their consumers, and how corporate and academic researchers investigate marketplace issues and puzzles. Levy’s fundamental contributions to marketing thought may be summarized as follows: 1. He led the way in broadening the understanding of marketing, opening out its application to spheres beyond business. 2. He introduced the concept of brand image whereby branding is seen to be an integrative process of activity and communication. 3. He pioneered insights into the symbolic nature of marketing communication. 4. He fostered the multi-disciplinary and depth analysis of marketplace behavior. 5. He led in the development and application of qualitative methods of research. 6. His theories and educational activities have influenced researchers and practitioners around the world.

The breadth, longevity, and influence of Sidney Levy's thinking are unique; his contribution to marketing thought and practice is extraordinary, and his stature among his peers today, to Sidney's embarrassment, verges toward that of a venerated "guru.” In addition to the general dissemination of his ideas throughout the field of marketing, his 36-year teaching career at Northwestern University's Kellogg Graduate School of Management has directly affected several generations of managers. His Ph.D. students are faculty at the world's leading business schools today.

In November 1997, Sid Levy was inducted as the first "Living Legend of Marketing" at the HEC-Montreal School of Business in Montreal, Canada. In the parlance of my Southern California subculture, SJL is a big "star" whose gentle and generous brilliance has defined marketing's professional borders, content, technology, and ethos for over 50 years. His earlier writings introduced core marketing concepts such as brand imagery and lifestyle analysis; these and more recent publications illuminate compelling, contemporary topics such as brand equity, product symbolism, consumer motivation, marketing ethics, focus groups, projective methods, and global marketing. His classic seminal work, “Symbols for Sale” (76), which was published in the Harvard Business Review in 1959, received in May 2000, the American Marketing Association's Converse Award that recognizes articles and educators with notably great long-term impact in the field.

Since the 1950s, Sid Levy has shared his ideas and observations throughout the world in classrooms, boardrooms, and at academic symposia and governmental conferences. From my own observations, academics tend to think of Sid Levy as a professor, and as a consumer behavior theorist. True enough, but relatively few grasp his long and distinguished career in marketing research and consulting, or of its relationship to his academic writings. Levy began conducting consumer research in 1948, at Social Research, Inc. in Chicago. His subsequent and continuing contribution to qualitative research theory and practice is immense and inspiring, and
continues to encourage marketing managers and researchers in designing and fielding qualitative studies with more confidence and creativity. Across all his writing, Levy presents a fascinating perspective on marketing's fertile mix of products, companies, and consumers. Many of Levy's articles provide excellent examples of how his mind abstracts from particular commercial needs, for example, to sell more root beer, to a general theory of beverage behavior (28). Levy's theories and their practical applications should inform the recurring and often contentious academic debate about the merits of particular versus universal research in marketing.

To look more closely at Sidney Levy's work, I have organized his writings into five content areas: 1) marketing, 2) products and brands, 3) the symbolic nature of marketing, 4) consumer analyses and observations, and 5) qualitative methods of marketing study. Levy's contributions in each area are substantial, and if the reader would like to read from the source directly, I recommend his most recent contribution to the Journal of Consumer Research, that field's premier scholarly journal (5). Not only is this a recent publication, it is his most autobiographical, and it provides a provocative and lyrical distillation of his main ideas. For readers who wish access to more of his writings, let me recommend the comprehensive collection of Levy's writings I edited last year (1). I hope the following discussion will encourage more intensive examination of his body of work.

Marketing

Marketing practitioners and scholars often see things from different perspectives. Yet, one area of general agreement is an almost normative belief about the broad and malleable applicability of basic marketing concepts and tools in ever more diverse management settings and situations. Over the past half century, marketing thought and practice has radiated from its contemporary origins in packaged goods manufacturers to a current prominent presence in the economy's service sectors, non-profit organizations, arts and entertainment enterprises, healthcare providers, religious organizations, the professions, and political campaigns. Marketing seems to be "at work" almost everywhere today and, in fact, is a successful American export. Managers throughout the world share similar concerns that are expressed in a common marketing language, and focus on a common core of strategic issues about consumers, targets, positioning, the competition, and the marketing environment. Historically, this diffusion transpired steadily and rapidly, which might lead one to believe that marketing's acceptance, adoption and growth was inevitable, a preordained progression.

Perhaps so, but the current widely received view about marketing's broad mission did not materialize from beneficent thin air. Rather, ideas about marketing that we now matter-of-factly share emerged from a fierce intellectual battle that took place over twenty-five years ago. Sidney Levy was a principal combatant in this war, and he led the forces who favored broadening over restricting marketing's definition and domain. To note the obvious, Levy's views prevailed, and modern enterprise generally exhibits a more expansive concept of marketing. Yet, flare-ups of this core debate reappear occasionally, and reintroduce various sources of mental and organizational resistance to marketing, and the battle is resumed. For example, extensive focus group research in well-funded political campaigns often attracts criticism that candidates are pandering to research findings; and today's telemarketers are derided as intrusive spies, or worse. Even many advertising creative personnel hate to market-test their copy; and fine arts
sensibilities are prone to find the very idea of marketing vulgar and unappealing. These examples illustrate an important point. Although marketing's intellectual paradigm shift occurred when today's prototypical forty-five-year-old marketing executive was finishing high school, aftershocks from this debate can introduce powerful ideas into his or her professional life today. For example, a corporate mission that prioritizes an expanded marketing orientation, has profound consequences for managers' activities, budgets, resource requirements, and performance evaluation. Thus, ideas about the nature of marketing are not merely historical, and modern marketers and scholars can benefit from better understanding their evolution and dissemination.

Levy's writing's about "marketing" reflect concerns about its domain, content, and application. He is particularly recognized for his contributions to basic, philosophical ideas about the nature of marketing. The centerpiece of this work is "Broadening the Concept of Marketing" (57), written with Levy's Northwestern colleague, Philip Kotler. When the article appeared in the Journal of Marketing in January, 1969, it quickly attracted acclaim, but also vehement, if somewhat hysterical criticism for its perceived "potential to diminish social order." Levy's response, "Toward a Broader Concept of Marketing's Role in Social Order" (39), was published in the Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, and ultimately disarmed those arguing for a more restrictive concept of "marketing." Articles in academic journals are rarely recognized as having this kind of potential! Today's reader, however, is unlikely to perceive this article as revolutionary pamphleteering, because its ideas are now so mainstream. The broadening idea was actually foreshadowed in Levy's talk to a social welfare group about motivation research ten years earlier (78).

Equally important are the underlying ideas that elaborate and extend Levy's primary premise about the expansive nature of marketing. A 1976 article, "Marcology 101 or the Domain of Marketing" (45), is a delightful and thought-provoking essay that examines historical sources of ambivalence and hostility toward marketing, and proposes more neutral, objective ground for marketing theory and practice. "What Kind of Corporate Objectives?" (62), co-authored ten years earlier with Northwestern colleague Harper Boyd, is a useful companion piece that illustrates how marketing's role in a particular corporate setting will vary according to a company's relative focus on material resources and fabrication processes, or on consumers' traits and activities. Another collaboration with Philip Kotler, "Demarketing, Yes, Demarketing," highlights Levy's Zen-like creative thinking in arguing that "the marketer's task is to shape demand, rather than to blindly engineer increases in sales." This article appeared in 1971 in the Harvard Business Review (55), and served managers who in subsequent years would be challenged to cope with product shortages and overheated demand in numerous categories (oil, Cabbage Patch dolls, tourism), or to reduce demand from specific market segments. The breadth of Levy's exploration into the nature of marketing is evident also in the volume he wrote in 1975 with Gerald Zaltman, Marketing, Society, and Conflict (46), showing marketing's essential integration in the social system.

In 1970, "Broadening the Concept of Marketing" was selected to receive the Alpha Kappa Psi award for best theoretical article in the Journal of Marketing. While this represents an intellectual victory for Levy and other proponents of a broadened marketing concept, an equally important aspect of this paradigm shift lies in the actual extensions of marketing concepts to
professional arenas that were often unfamiliar with and sometimes hostile to marketing's perspective and promise. Three articles in particular illustrate marketing's interactions with aesthetics, ethics, government, education and health. "Marketing and Aesthetics" (48), co-authored in 1974 with New York University’s John Czepiel, offers insights into the role of aesthetics in marketing management, and argues the mutuality between the two fields. Arguably, the recent emphasis on product design and, more generally, the growth of marketing in both fine and commercial arts, reflect the seminal qualities of this article. A more recent discussion, "Absolute Ethics, Relatively Speaking" (8) considers the renewed emphasis on ethical issues in marketing. If one had to select a topic that is rife with such issues, cigarette smoking would be a good candidate. In an article published almost thirty-five years ago in Business Horizons, "Cigarette Smoking and the Public Interest" (67), Levy and Harper Boyd explore this issue with a breadth of perspective and a prescience that is striking. Many of the remedies they identify have been adopted, or are the subject of contemporary dialogue.

**Products and Brands**

Consumers in post-industrial economies reside in "branded" cultures, where markets are ever more populated by a universe of brand offerings, and companies strive continually to gain visibility and attract customers to their brands. The economic significance of brands receives frequent press attention, and over the past several years experts have variously debated whether brands are "on the run" or the "main thing." In the 1980s, dramatic decreases in advertising, the growth of private and store brands, and recessionary pressures on consumers encouraged some business writers to declare the end of the great American brand era. Obviously, this epitaph was premature and, also, oblivious to the cyclical nature of such things. Today, brands are on the upswing, and both managers and scholars pay more attention to the idea of "brand equity." Given the current emphasis on brands, an enduring influence is the concept of the "brand image."

This idea was first introduced by Sid Levy over forty years ago, in "The Product and the Brand" (82) which appeared in the Harvard Business Review in 1955. The concept grew out of Sid Levy's work at Social Research, Inc. (with colleagues Burleigh B. Gardner, W. Lloyd Warner, Harriett Bruce Moore, Lee Rainwater, Ira O. Glick, Gerald Handel, Richard P. Coleman, and others). SRI began in 1946 and involved numerous research studies of how consumers perceived products and brands. Across these diverse studies, Levy discovered the explanatory power of the concept of imagery, and he characterized a brand as a "complex symbol" that incorporates consumers' motives, feelings, logic and attitudes. Consequently, consumers think of brands not merely as bundles of features and obvious benefits, but as more richly complex entities with different personalities, public personas, and other, often non-obvious symbolic qualities.

This new, sophisticated thinking attracted immediate attention, particularly from advertising agencies and their clients. Industry pioneer David Ogilvy praised “The Product and the Brand” in a 1955 speech to the American Association of Advertising Agencies, thereby sending the “brand image” concept into orbit. The article's historical impact rests not only in its seminal articulation of brand imagery, but in its understanding of the need to integrate all marketing mix efforts to support "long term investment in the reputation of the brand." Many managers today probably view "integrated marketing" as a recent innovation, yet its basic foundations were
articulated in this article, over forty-five years ago. Another contribution of this work comes from its recognition of the advantages of qualitative research methods for discovering the depth and subtlety of consumers' brand images.

Other articles extend Levy's thinking about brands to several key arenas, including intellectual property law, competitive strategy, and global economic and marketing development. Today, there is much discussion about developing brands as part of the new product development process; somewhat less dialogue about managing a brand's image as it grows toward maturity; and very little said about what to do when a brand seems past its prime, and headed downhill. One factor that discourages more vigorous dialogue about post-maturity brands is the pervasive, pessimistic assumption that their marketing decline is inevitable. In "Defending the Dowager: Communications Strategies for Declining Main Brands" (1), Levy and I propose a framework for understanding the reasons for consumers' movements away from a once top brand, and we suggest procedures for designing communication strategies to win some of them back.

The relationship between brands and their intellectual property concerns is an area of growing interest. Trademark rights and infringement disputes are big ticket, strategic concerns for many companies today. In "Brands, Trademarks, and the Law" (34), Levy and I emphasize the need to understand how consumers identify a brand, distinguish it from others, and interpret its various meanings, in order to make realistic and effective assessments in trademark infringement and loss of rights litigation.

Consumers who pay attention to the "made in..." sections of product labels are well aware how many different countries are represented today. This country-of-origin information provides new levels of stimulation and meaning; a typical department store sportswear section, for example, is a virtual United Nations of garments, which causes one sometimes to ponder differences between a pair of shorts from India versus Sri Lanka...and where exactly is Gabon? In a 1991 article, "Marketing Stages in Developing Nations" (13), Levy provides an analysis of how countries acquire brand images, and how these change as countries move from being viewed as sources of cheap labor and shoddy goods, toward images as providers of higher quality, more creative, and more refined products and services. In "The Two Tiers of Marketing" (19), Levy interprets these global market movements as part of a larger interplay between the forces of what he characterizes as obligatory versus permissive marketing.

The Symbolic Nature of Marketing

Some managers might think of symbolic behavior as too erudite, abstract, and remote from their pragmatic interests. This would be incorrect, since product and brand symbolism is directly applicable to important, contemporary marketing concerns. At the core of Levy's thinking is the observation that consumers buy products and brands not only for so-called functional reasons, but for the various symbolic meanings that their consumption provides. As a result, it is important and beneficial for marketing managers to understand the symbolic motivations that animate consumers' purchases. Despite the persuasive logic of this premise, the symbolic nature of marketing is often a managerial blindspot, which has pernicious consequences for how
Managers understand their customers, create offerings for them, allocate marketing mix resources, and design marketing communications.

In 1978, Sid Levy published a textbook, *Marketplace Behavior: Its Meaning for Management* (42). As a student in his doctoral seminar, I read the entire book, but found myself often returning to one particular paragraph in it, which was taken from an earlier article, “Myth and Meaning in Marketing” (49). "One of marketing’s traditionally sad lacks lies in its reluctance to deal with the less tangible realms of explanations of human behavior. Given to a narrow sense of realism, practicality, and the tenacious grip of the economic man, marketers ordinarily resist areas of understanding that have to do with symbols, myths, legends, arbitrary belief, and fantasy." Arguably, the economic mind's grip is still quite strong. The late dramatic shift of marketing dollars from advertising to consumer and trade promotions reflects a managerial world view that depicts consumers as obsessively "price-driven" and apparently immune to product and brand symbols that reflect their age, sex, social status, maturity, lifestyle, fantasy life and other consumer characteristics. However, by most accounts, the many "price-driven" strategies of the past decade have often produced disastrous consequences. The current revival of brand advertising suggests a growing appreciation of marketing images and symbols, and of the role that marketing communications plays in building corporate and brand images.

Sidney Levy embraces rather than dismisses the symbolic aspects of marketing. His writing provides a comprehensive orientation to the core concepts of symbolic analysis, and it demonstrates the pragmatic benefits of studying the symbols by which consumers buy. Sid Levy's contributions to this arena are extensive, seminal, and continuing. As noted, the key article, "Symbols for Sale (76)," appeared in the *Harvard Business Review* in the summer of 1959 and has just been honored by the Paul D. Converse Award. This is a wonderful and timeless piece; a few dated brand examples notwithstanding, the thinking is entirely fresh. The article translates the abstruse, sometimes murky concepts of symbolic analysis into an equally sophisticated but more accessible language and framework. To paraphrase a recurring theme in Bill Clinton's first campaign, "It's about meaning, stupid!" Yet, the obvious is sometimes difficult to discern, and "Symbols for Sale," although over forty years old, is an excellent departure point for better understanding of the symbolic aspects of marketing.

Other articles elaborate and extend the seminal thinking of "Symbols for Sale." In 1963, Levy published "Symbolism and Lifestyle" (65), in which he interprets the sum of individuals' consumption of symbolic goods and services as a *lifestyle*. This thinking expands the common, useful, but too narrow style of inquiry that links a consumer (e.g., a middle-age man) to a focal product or brand (e.g., a Corvette), with motivating, symbolic meaning (e.g., youthful, affluent), to a broader perspective that examines the totality of such relationships that constitute an overall consumption lifestyle. Historically, this article introduced the *lifestyle* concept to the marketing field some years before the advent of lifestyle "psychographics" in the 1970s.

Another key element of the symbolic nature of marketing is the concept of imagery. In 1973's "Imagery and Symbolism" (50), Levy links his seminal work on brand imagery, "The Product and the Brand" (82), to the various practical concerns that marketing managers have in creating, maintaining or modifying a brand image over time. The ideas in this article are particularly relevant to the on-going debate about the relative merits of short-term promotional
tactics over longer-term brand image strategies. One constraint to better brand image management is the common but erroneous notion that only certain products are symbolic. In "Symbols, Selves, and Others" (32), Levy observes that catheters and computers are just as symbolic as cars and cologne, and business-to-business marketers have image management issues similar to those shared by consumer product managers.

Sid Levy's work is characterized by a strong interdisciplinary orientation, and this applies to his thinking about the symbolic aspects of marketing. In "Myth and Meaning in Marketing" (49), Levy explains the value of anthropological concepts and methods for marketing analyses. In the article titled “Hunger and Work in a Civilized Tribe, or the Anthropology of Market Transactions” (41), he traces the development of anthropological thought and its relationship to marketing ideas and research. With its particular emphasis on symbolic cultural objects and processes, anthropology yields rich insights into the less tangible but significant symbolic realms of consumer experience. Levy's thinking in this 1974 article anticipates the emergence of anthropological inquiry in marketing, and the migration of several prominent anthropologists into the marketing arena. In a parallel vein, in "Semiotician Ordinaire" (22), Levy discusses the mutuality of interest between marketing problems and analyses, and those of semioticians. Both involve the formal study of signs and symbols, and recent marketing thought has been enriched by a new reliance on the symbolic theories and methods drawn from semiotics and related fields.

Another three articles provide interesting examples of the application of symbolic analysis in different marketing settings. In his 1960 work, "Symbols of Substance, Source and Sorcery" (75), Levy addresses an audience of marketing creative personnel, and discusses how consumers interpret aesthetic symbols involving variation in form, line, movement and direction. Quite a different setting forms the basis for "The Public Image of Government Agencies" (69). This 1963 article is historically significant in its application of marketing thought to non-commercial, not-for-profit organizations. In the context of symbolic analyses, Levy demonstrates that, just like cookies and cereal, government agencies have marketplace images, too. His findings are amusing and provocative, and I invite the reader to consider his conclusion that many people actually want their government to be safely inefficient and lazy!

A more recent article, "Meanings in Advertising Stimuli" (24), is a brilliant essay that shows how Levy's thinking has expanded from the relatively simple, straight-forward presentation of "Symbols for Sale" to a more elaborate, highly nuanced framework. His discussion of the symbolic meanings of beverages (noted earlier in reference 28), and how to leverage them in a brand's marketing communication strategy, is quite a triumph. It has sparked considerable interest among product managers, advertising managers, and scholars alike. In their efforts to formulate marketing strategies and plans, marketing managers too often rely on dreary, vague ideas about "quality" and "value," which almost inevitably blunts the impact of their consumer communications. The numerous possibilities for symbolic communication presented in this article can help steer managers toward more targeted, original and meaningful marketing messages.

**Consumer Analyses and Observations**

Despite the conventional wisdom that managers benefit from better understanding their
customers, and the widely accepted directive to do so, marketing practice sometimes pays mere lip service to these tenets. Marketing plans often crudely characterize targeted consumers with broad demographic parameters (e.g., the omnipresent "housewives 18-49"), with a few gingerly references to their lifestyles as "active" or "aspirational." Obviously, consumers behaviors are more complex and multi-faceted, and Sid Levy has spent a lifetime explaining how managers and researchers can achieve richer, deeper, and more useful analyses of their consumers.

At the core of Levy's analyses of consumer behavior is an interdisciplinary orientation. Most contemporary marketing theorists readily acknowledge the "interdisciplinary nature" of marketing study, but few recognize that this kind of inquiry rarely occurs. True enough, marketing analyses draw from a variety of scholarly, behavioral disciplines -- most obviously psychology, sociology, economics and anthropology. Yet, the vast majority of research arises within the confines of a single, encapsulated field or sub-field (e.g., cognitive psychological experiments). Relatively little research actually reaches across disciplinary boundaries, and it is this integrative quality that distinguishes Sid Levy's writings.

Levy's approach to studying consumers relies on what he calls a "polyfocal vision." He elaborates this perspective in "Constructing Consumer Behavior: A Grand Template" (11), his 1991 "Presidential Address" to a plenary session at the Association of Consumer research annual conference. The article provides an excellent introduction to the various modes of thinking that consumer researchers do or might use. Collectively, Levy's consumer analyses reveal his role in defining the conceptual boundaries of "consumer behavior," and in introducing behavioral science thinking and methods to the field of consumer research. "The Cake Eaters" (1), in 1957, is an early yet timeless analysis of the psychosocial tensions that influence consumers' choices about spending versus saving their money. As the growing American economy increased both consumers' spending power and the variety of products vying for their attention, these consumption tensions become even more relevant. Levy's "Psychosocial Reactions to the Abundant Society" (1967), his "The Discretionary Society" (1970), and the more recent "Consumer Behavior in the United States: The Avid Consumer" (1987), expand and ramify his thinking about this core consumer dynamism (1).

Sid Levy's psychological analyses of consumers draw particularly from his training in psychoanalytic theories, life cycle developmental theories, and theories of personality. His writings have made substantial and original contributions toward the application of these perspectives to consumer analyses and the conduct of research. "Stalking the Amphisbaena" (5), is an extended meditation on the pervasiveness of ambivalence in our lives. He was, also, a pioneer in studying the profound effects of social stratification on consumption behavior. "Social Class and Consumer Behavior" (63) is a provocative and often amusing article that illustrates various manifestations of social strata effects and encourages readers to study them more explicitly and vigorously.

Levy's longstanding emphasis on marketing symbols and their cultural meanings laid the groundwork for the emergence of anthropological consumer research in the 1980s. In an admirable 1973 article, "Emotional Reactions to the Cutting of Trees" (1) he focused on the powerful cultural symbolism of the tree, and provided a refreshing alternative to the contemporary "good-guy-bad-guy" mentality of much discussion about environmental issues in
marketing. Rather, the analysis highlights how different social roles and kinds of self-interest affect people’s perceptions and the symbolic features they emphasize.

Levy’s basic thinking extends to particular problems, and several articles illustrate how he analyzes various consumer segments. That central, enduring marketing figure of the past fifty years -- the American housewife -- is analyzed in 1960 with insight and prescience in "Looking at the Ladies, Lately" (1). Reflecting the growing interest in marketing from non-profit organizations (a development that he anticipated in 1969's "Broadening the Concept of Marketing"), Levy analyzes the motivations for arts consumption in his 1980 publication, "Aesthetic Attributes and Arts Consumers" (38). Consumption of the arts and popular culture is a deep interest of Levy’s, making this article one of his favorites.

In his nearly fifty years with Social Research, Inc., initially as a part-time employee, and ultimately as president, Sidney Levy conducted many hundreds of studies that investigated consumer behavior in numerous different product categories. Naturally, most of these are proprietary and unpublished. Several publications, however, illustrate his distinctive, integrative analytic approach to investigating consumers' product category experiences. I collaborated with him on two of these; the first, "Social Division and Aesthetic Specialization: The Middle Class and Musical Events" (36), examines how consumers experiment with different musical milieu, develop psychosocial preferences, and become fans of a particular type of musical product. In "Psychosocial Themes in Consumer Grooming Rituals" (30), we demonstrate that beyond conventional concerns about hygiene, consumers' grooming behavior and product purchases are motivated by social, vocational, sexual, and fantasy factors.

Finally, in his recent "Giving Voice to the Gift: The Use of Projective Techniques to Recover Lost Meanings" (9), Levy and co-authors Mary Ann McGrath and John Sherry, Jr., creatively explore the complexities of buyer behavior in the billion dollar domain of gift-giving. Across their entirety, Levy's writings reveal that consumer research is an exciting, complex, and humanistic enterprise.

**Qualitative Methods of Marketing Study**

As a trained social research scientist, Sidney Levy has always been concerned with methodology, especially with the approaches described as depth analytic, projective, ethnographic, etc., and fostered their application in the context of marketing studies. He has joked about predicting a revival of qualitative marketing research, at various intervals, over the past forty years. I suppose this could be characterized as somewhat wishful thinking, yet historical evidence supports Levy's observations. As the basic concept of marketing broadened in the 1970s, so did its underlying theories and research methods. At almost any subsequent point in time, it is possible to observe marketing dialogue about new ideas and research protocols borrowed, progressively, from clinical psychology, sociology, cultural anthropology, semiotics, and rhetoric. Each of these disciplines offers distinctive qualitative research tools, and their introduction into the marketing arena attracted a spurt of interest and excitement. Thus, the "revival" of qualitative research in marketing occurred gradually, but with periodic spikes of growth.

This gradual diffusion notwithstanding, two key historical periods stand out and merit some
attention. In both of these, Sidney Levy played a key role. The first period is now widely labeled as the "Motivation Research" era, which began after the Second World War. Its name reflects management's emerging interests in the motivational aspects of consumers' buying behavior. Levy chronicles this era in a 1958 article, "Motivation Research" (78), which details both the thinking that gave rise to it, and the kinds of qualitative research that hundreds of businesses came to use to better understand their consumers. In the 1950s and 1960s, this type of research was so pervasive that some social alarmists decried its use (e.g., Vance Packard's *Hidden Persuaders*). Levy reflects on these ethical and related issues in a 1988 essay, "Marketing Research as A Dialogue" (21).

One important aspect of this period was the degree to which managerial and academic thinking and research practices were relatively in synch, and mutually informed each other. Articles reporting qualitative studies appeared in journals targeted to both audiences, and various books chronicled the burgeoning qualitative armament and its research uses. Sid Levy's writings and activities during this period illustrate a harmony between marketing theory and practice that is generally lacking today. Numerous commercial studies he engineered at Social Research, Inc. in Chicago, contributed to his seminal theorizing about brands, images, and marketing symbols that was published in the era's leading business journal, the *Harvard Business Review* (82, 76) and elsewhere (83, 81, 72, 71, 70). Interestingly, compared to the contemporary obsession with technical procedures, methodological issues raised few hackles. Although, critics attacked motivational research and some practitioners for both specific ("too Freudian") and more vague "excesses," it was largely absorbed into the marketing mainstream as necessary and beneficial to strategic and tactical concerns.

At the same time, however, qualitative research was beginning to disappear rapidly from marketing's academic literature. In fact, by the end of the 1970s, the academic community seemed unreasonably hostile about qualitative research. However, an antithesis, even a revolution of sorts was brewing in various academic locations throughout the U.S. and Europe. Dissatisfied with existing theory and methods, a critical number of bright and professionally prominent consumer researchers, most of them professors of marketing, began working with qualitative methods in the early-to-mid 1980s. Their numbers steadily increased, and their research made its way into scholarly publications. The ensuing paradigm shift marks the second revival of interest in qualitative marketing study, and triggered its reappearance in the academic literature. Sidney Levy played a distinctive role here, too, although quite a different one from what we described in the motivation research era.

In some ways, nothing changed. Sidney continued to publish theoretical and empirical articles, about old and new concerns. But the field's response to his work had evolved dramatically. The new generation of qualitative researchers looked on Sidney as a model, a source of inspiration, and for many, a hero. On numerous occasions I have heard him described as a "guru," and occasionally, to his embarrassment, as a "deity."

During this period in the 1980s, Levy's work was recognized in various ways. He was selected as a Fellow in the Association of Consumer Research. "Fellow" designation here is rare and undiluted. One publication, "Interpreting Consumer Mythology: A Structural Approach to Consumer Behavior" (33), won the best theory article in the *Journal of Marketing* in 1981, an
award Levy first won in 1970. He was elected as President of the Association of Consumer Research for 1991. These accolades were doubly gratifying because they served not only to recognize the work of a distinguished, seminal scholar, they symbolically "opened the door" for others with aspirations to master recently taboo qualitative research methods. I am also aware that Levy has specific admirers in numerous parts of the world. His thinking has impacted academic and practitioner thinking in diverse countries such as Japan, Denmark, France, India, to mention but a few.

However, the historical neglect of qualitative methods by academics was not without its consequences. Academics, after all, write textbooks. Marketing research textbooks have largely been written by statistically-oriented professors whose coverage of qualitative research is relatively thin, and often fundamentally wrong. Because managers learn marketing research from these texts, their sophistication about qualitative methods is generally low. As a result, business uses of qualitative methods have atrophied into an extraordinary reliance on focus groups. Sidney Levy's methodological articles offer an antidote for this drought. They also chronicle Levy's extensive involvement with in-depth interviews, projective techniques, and other qualitative methods, as vehicles for conceptualizing and investigating consumer behavior.

A recent article, "What is Qualitative Research" (6), provides an excellent, retrospective overview of both the history and logic of various qualitative methods. "Musings of a Researcher: The Human Side of Interviewing" (47), is a charming and amusing piece that brings the reader into the world of the women who actually execute managers' qualitative research designs in the field. Today's marketing managers would benefit from reading this and, as a result, might place fewer preposterous demands on research respondents and field personnel.

Two articles focus on the distinctive qualities and benefits of projective research methods: "Thematic Assessment of Executives" (70), and "Dreams, Fairy Tales, Animals, and Cars" (25). The latter is broader in scope, and provides both theoretical and operational guidance for using various projective techniques. Focus groups receive Levy's attention in "Focus Groups: Mixed Blessing" (1, 51). His often humorous treatment captures the feeling of real focus group research, and makes one wonder why we so eagerly spend over half a billion dollars annually on such murky activities. An alternative, depth interviewing of individuals, provides the foundation for Levy's theorizing in the previously mentioned, award-winning publication, "Interpreting Consumer Mythology" (33).

Two of Levy's articles anticipated and laid groundwork for the migration of anthropological thinking into marketing. Historically, (1978) "Hunger and Work in a Civilized Tribe" (41) introduced the role of cultural studies in consumer research. An earlier, 1963, publication, "New Dimensions in Consumer Analysis" (66), discussing the “consumption system,” was classically ahead of its time in anticipating the kind of important but excruciating detail that consumer ethnographers value. Deborah Heisley's and Levy's publication, "Autodriving: A Photoelicitation Technique" (12) grew from her doctoral student collaboration with him, and imaginatively relies on hybrid methodology drawn from both psychology and anthropology.
Concluding Comments

I am, obviously, not alone in recognizing Sidney Levy's substantial contributions to the way scholars and managers think about marketing, brands, symbols, consumers, and research. Harvard's Gerald Zaltman recently described Levy as a "master craftsman who has created more individual pieces of work that merit this status (masterpiece) than any other marketing scholar I know" (1). While his scholarship in marketing is nonpareil, his writing is highly accessible and lively. Sidney's writing is always interesting, engaging, provocative, and fun to read. A second aspect that distinguishes his work from most others is its interdisciplinary nature. Levy's thinking eclectically dances and weaves across behavioral disciplines, and by mixing things up, he offers original, polyfocal perspectives to marketing situations that are commonly construed much too narrowly. Another enduring quality of his work is an emphasis on the role of interpretive analysis in marketing management. This idea materialized in his 1950s landmark articles about products, brands and symbols and it is forcefully reiterated in his recent journal article, "Stalking the Amphisbaena" (5).

Looking at Sid Levy's achievements from today's perspective, individuals might erroneously conclude that his accomplishments were akin to anointment! This is historically incorrect, as another quality of his work is the intellectual conflict it had to overcome. On almost every theoretical and research front, Levy had to confront literal-minded and sometimes mean-spirited critics who derided his nuanced analyses, his emphasis on non-economic variables, and his use of "touchy-feely" research methods. Yet, one advantage of a retrospective is the opportunity to observe how his ideas have prevailed.

Finally, Sidney Levy's work is characterized by both prescience and timelessness. In many of his articles, I am struck by how many developments that Levy predicted years ago have come true! A particularly striking example of this visionary quality can be found in "Cigarette Smoking and the Public Interest," which was published in 1963, and which anticipates many of the specific developments that have occurred in this controversial arena. Not only prescient, Levy's writings have a timeless quality. As an example, I again refer the reader to "Symbols for Sale" (76). Except for minor details (e.g., now defunct brands), this material is strikingly contemporary. This timelessness, I believe, is a measure of work that has enduring impact, vitality, and utility.

Bibliography of Writings by Sidney J. Levy


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As a principal in Social Research, Inc. for many years, Dr. Levy directed and participated in research investigations on behalf of numerous organizations, including major corporations,
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Sidney J. Levy was born in St. Louis, Missouri, U.S.A., May 29, 1921. He grew up in Chicago where his parents, immigrants from Russia (Ukraine), strove to make a living in the produce business. He married Bobette Adler in 1953. Their son, Bruce, was a mathematician and computer virtuoso who died in 1997; their daughter, Joyce, an outstanding attorney, is expert in the field of taxes and estates planning.