Commentary on a Paper by Evert Gummesson

David Ballantyne
Monash University
Australia

When I first met Evert Gummesson ten years ago in Brussels, he was presenting a paper on Total Quality Management (TQM) to an audience of mostly practitioners. He was talking about the nature of relationships and the therapeutic value to be had in clinical massage. Of course he did not stop at that and went on to convincingly explain how this was of utmost significance to recognising TQM and services marketing as parallel processes. Swedes can do that with a straight face.

I responded well to this mind expanding kind of divergent thinking then and still do; as a method of generating new understanding in research it works because it is fundamentally empirical (grounded in the reality of experience). Also, in Gummesson’s hands, there is a serious yet often playful concern with putting ideas together that people conventionally don’t think go together. He has done it again in his new millennium marketing article titled Total Relationship Marketing and it works.

In this article, diverse information is re-framed for the reader, if we are willing to participate with the author and create some mental space for conscious reflection. By re-framing I mean bringing many ideas together in the one frame of reference. In this way the illusion of one pattern of cause and consequence is broken. Later, we may begin to connect Gummesson’s ideas in action with our own for the greater good.

Much of what we call progress occurs because of a change of viewpoint, in which a new pattern of ideas is recognised and we see things differently. This can be a painful, doubt creating and anxious making experience. There are always pioneers and most notable for me in marketing are the leaders and members of the Nordic School of Services Marketing and the IMP Group, largely but not exclusively centred in Europe. I have commented on these relationship-marketing antecedents in an earlier issue of this journal (Ballantyne 1996).

Especially over the last ten years, interaction has emerged as a keystone concept when coupled to the role played by relationships in creating, developing and sustaining exchanges changes of value between the parties involved. For me, relationships evolve as the reciprocal to interaction. As if Yin and Yang. This may be understood at various levels of organisation, for example, the individual worker, the firm, the network organisation, community levels and more. This is my personal understanding of the current state of affairs. Be aware however that at last count there was at least 26 definitions of relationship marketing afloat, collected by literature review and presented in a classification matrix (Harker 1999).

What is different about the Gummesson thesis? Evert puts it succinctly, expressing his understanding of the ‘total’ nature of marketing as ‘interaction in networks of relationships’. His paper discusses and combines a number of theoretical and practical perspectives to create what he terms a total relationship marketing concept. He says it is driven by a passion for syntheses, ‘to see contexts and the interconnections between phenomena.’ At once we are alerted to a new and expanded perspective in the making. Of course we have seen that word ‘total’ before, in TQM.

He sets out his argument in the opening pages and I grasp its meaning this way: Marketing is myopic when it seeks to apply the perspective of its own discipline without properly considering the societal context within which marketing operates, and indeed the context of life itself. Relationship marketing is total because marketing relationships are embedded in organisations, markets and society. Value is
jointly created with individual customers and other stakeholders, necessarily transcending the boundaries between specialist functions and disciplines. The total concept is made operational through 30 key relationship cycles, the 30Rs (Gummesson 1999).

What are we to make of this? Certainly the keystone concept of interaction is here. Likewise the idea of markets as networks, whereby clusters of firms collaborate in order to compete (Mattsson 1997). Also, he draws attention to the ever-present reality of collaboration as a reciprocal to competition in the market economy. It’s just that we weren’t looking. (Wilkinson and Young 1994). A third functioning element, institutions/regulations, is added to complete his concept of marketing equilibrium. Also, that value is created with customers, suppliers, staff and other stakeholders is recognised (Christopher, Payne and Ballantyne 1991). All this is relationship marketing orthodoxy today, even if mainstream marketing texts still know little of it except as splintered subsets of the 4Ps or as a few pages among other ‘new developments’ in the final chapter.

What for me is paradigm challenging about the Gummesson thesis is not the way in which marketing is said to be embedded in society and life. Yes, this is certainly a comprehensive view of marketing indeed a common sense one. However, in my view, the paradigm challenge comes when we recognise the character of the new scientific world-view underpinning that embedding. That is, relationship marketing as a total management activity is recognised as systemic, holistic, and above all, an activity of dynamic complexity.

Today we seem to be in the acceleration phase of a change of age. Certainly, we are moving from viewing business situations as being constructed of detailed complexity to the more challenging circumstance of dynamic complexity. The Internet is one of the more striking examples, demonstrating that relationships can be social or technical, or both. So it is that everyday business reality assumptions no longer apply. Peter Senge (1990), for example, has popularised the idea that conventional forecasting, planning and analytical methods will not be agile enough to capture dynamic complexity, except in the very short term. In other words, business actions and reactions are no longer linear, mono-causal or indeed traceable as to cause. Indeed, they never really were. What is involved here is a shift of thinking, from parts to the whole, recognition of new patterning of relationships, especially in a broader contextual framework, so as to begin again to understand the nature of those relationships and their permeable boundaries (Capra 1996).

We are inclined to think of boundaries as rigid but the fact is that the patterns they delineate may vary over time if we choose to look across time. Boundaries mark the limits of likeness and the beginning of difference. This applies to strategic alliances, a social network or to the market reach of a joint stock company. This systemic understanding can be extended to appropriate limits of practicality (Ambrose 1989). We can even conceive of the self as a territory with boundaries. The behaviour of the whole is more than the sum of its parts, and not merely the sum of its parts. Less ambiguously put, it is the achievement of coordination of the parts that makes an organisation self-contained.

The invitation I think Gummesson offers to us is this: Think wide! Collaborate! How many ways can you understand the potential for creative innovation in projects of jointly created value? Rethink the theoretical underpinning of our marketing discipline! This is both an optimistic agenda for the future and a defence against mind constraining straight jackets and marketing myopia. Of course, rigid relationship boundaries act to control the anxiety of those who collude to share only in the familiar. Whenever boundaries are permeable and moveable, as to region, race or resource, marketing relationships can act as conduits for the generation and circulation of value, extending the levels of organisational reach but also introducing greater complexity (Ambler and Ballantyne 1998).

This new paradigm challenging, systemic-emergent-world-view connects with the new science of complexity in which interaction is characterised as a near chaotic state (Varela, Thompson, and Rosch 1991). Because feedback from each interaction leads to more than one possible response, there will be a variety of consequences and the effects of these are amplified over time. Likewise, the effects of small changes from plan may also be amplified, fed back into dialogue, and so the consequences become less certain.

In chaotic organisational conditions, at the edge of stability, a paradoxical place of self-organisation and order, disorder and decay, market behaviour cannot be predicted but it can be understood. If you understand the big systemic picture, some now say that work activity can become fluid, creative and innovative, emerging and self-organising in patterns of great individual variety (Stacey 1996).

Clearly our approach to researching in relationship marketing is in need of review to match such a scientific world-view. Certainly, observation as a method of qualitative inquiry requires that the observer formulates and recognises patterns in events, the recurring nature of happenings, and reflects on possible consequences of one happening on another. Qualitative is often more revealing than quantitative but ‘experience’ is open to contradictory interpretations governed by social interests rather than objective truth (Richardson 1994). On the other hand, quantitative time series studies capture movement and change but not always with
much significance.
It seems to me that action research/action science is promising and its alignment with systemic practice makes this more so. It recognises that action generates knowledge and research generates action in iterative cycles of close collaboration with the subject(s) of study. As it happens, Gummesson (1991) has already laid the groundwork for his preferred action science approach. Also, Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers’s journal of Systemic Practice and Action Research is an excellent resource.

Nature is not obligated to conform to the positivist quest for uni-directional models or perspectives. Any single marketing interaction can impact on any other interaction, so any (dyadic) relationship between a firm and the customer (even a single customer) will ‘interfere’ with other relationships. Is this not a challenge to traditional marketing, as we know it? We need as many models as we need. You have to put on Evert Gummesson’s total relationship marketing spectacles to see what you can see.

REFERENCES


