



# What is marketing? Three defining properties

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## Abstract

This commentary discusses a recent call to redefine marketing by focusing on its fundamental meaning and purpose. The commentary proposes three unique, defining properties of marketing that a conceptualization of the “overarching marketing phenomenon” should accommodate to resonate with both business and academia: an externally oriented value-creation mindset, an outside-in perspective, and an integrative, relational orientation.

**Keywords** Marketing · Marketing phenomenon · Marketing concept · Marketing practice

## Introduction

The crisis of marketing is a recurring topic of conversation in our discipline. Common concerns include the fragmentation of the field (Hunt, 2020), the declining impact of marketing both as a discipline and at the upper echelon (e.g., Clark et al., 2014; Verhoef & Leeflang, 2009), and the ongoing challenges marketing leaders face in demonstrating the strategic value of marketing and being credited with contributing to business outcomes (Gardner, 2024). Perhaps a common feature underlying these crises is the lack of consensus on the *core phenomenon* of marketing. Grönroos (2026, this issue) makes the fundamental claim that our discipline has taken for granted what marketing is, myopically focusing on marketing *activities* without considering its *inner meaning and purpose*, and calls for redefining marketing by considering the “overarching marketing phenomenon.”

The core focus and definition of marketing have long been subjects of debate. Grönroos’s (2026, this issue) article raises several excellent prerequisites for defining the marketing phenomenon and highlights past mistakes in such attempts, but it does not yet propose a better definition. At the same time, although the scholarly field of marketing

continues to broaden, in business practice, key responsibilities—such as sales and product management—often reside outside the marketing department. This organizational separation can contribute to a comparatively narrow managerial view of what marketing entails, often limiting it to communications, content creation, and campaigns. The purpose of this commentary is to contribute to this valuable debate with concrete suggestions about the defining properties of marketing that set our discipline apart from other business areas and disciplines both in business and academia, and which a future definition should accommodate.

To that end, it is important to clarify what I mean by the *phenomenon of marketing*. Here, marketing as a phenomenon (singular) refers to an overarching, more stable definition of the properties of marketing, constituting the domain of marketing science and practice (for example, currently defined by the American Marketing Association as “the processes of creating value”). At the same time, numerous phenomena that dynamically emerge in the marketplace and society can be addressed by marketing due to these unique properties. This commentary focuses on the former.

## Who should define the phenomenon of marketing?

When marketing is viewed as an applied science, a straightforward way to define it is to consider marketing as what marketers do. However, that would be an inadequate approach: first, marketing research explores a rich array of topics and phenomena that have little or nothing to do with the marketing function. Second, managerial activities that we consider intuitively as marketing related—such as

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Invited commentary on a manuscript by Grönroos, C.: “How to save marketing: Let’s focus on the phenomenon”

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developing products that enable superior customer experiences, visioning about the future markets, or ensuring the supply chain members develop relational ties to function more effectively—are often conducted by people who do not call themselves marketers, or even have any formal training in marketing (Ringold & Weitz, 2007; Dibb et al., 2014). Third, marketing is needed, and manifested also in contexts where marketing functions may play a very small role and financial profit is not the goal, such as in public services.

Therefore, defining the core phenomenon of marketing should be a scholarly job. Marketing is an organizational practice and a management philosophy, but also a theoretical constitution. As Grönroos (2026, this issue) notes, the overarching phenomenon of marketing should be defined in a way that captures its inner meaning and purpose, not as an afterthought of what is done. It should provide a broad view that transcends diverse marketing situations and contexts and readily accommodates not only firm profits but also outcomes for other stakeholders, such as those in the social, societal, and environmental realms. Next, I propose three unique properties of marketing that fulfil these criteria and can reconcile business and scholarly views: an externally oriented value-creation mindset, an outside-in perspective, and an integrative, relational orientation.

### Externally oriented value-creation mindset

The first defining property of marketing is an *externally oriented value-creation mindset*. Of course, the current AMA definition is focusing around activities “for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value” (AMA, 2007). However, Grönroos (2026, this issue) argues that the root cause of marketing’s crisis is its focus on activities that he considers too narrow to define marketing by (Grönroos, 2023). I argue that a problem with the current AMA definition is that it misses the *mindset* driving the activities. The existing definition labels any activities that contribute to value creation as marketing and, therefore, can be argued to encompass almost any activity within the firm or between trading parties in the marketplace. This view does not provide a specific identity and focus for our discipline, and is too abstract for practitioners.

I posit that marketing activities become the “phenomenon of marketing” when guided by an externally oriented value-creation mindset. The roots of this mindset lie in the long-standing “marketing concept,” which essentially refers to a business philosophy that focuses on fulfilling customer needs and integrating the whole organization around that goal. In today’s language, this philosophy is about focusing on value creation for the beneficiary and defining value from their perspective. The current AMA definition

overlooks this mindset, creating a blind spot in which we cannot attribute the outcomes of value-creation processes to marketing if they do not directly relate to conventional marketing activities or functions. For example, the board of directors, the CEO, or the engineering unit might have a market-oriented mindset guiding their actions (cf. Lunden et al., 2026), but those actions are conventionally not acknowledged as marketing. Conversely, if marketing-like activities are conducted without an underlying value-creation mindset, they may not provide a lasting foundation for positive outcomes. What makes these processes a marketing phenomenon is their externally oriented, multi-perspective understanding of value.

### Outside-in perspective

The second defining property of marketing is an *outside-in perspective*. Compared with many other business disciplines, marketing is inherently future-oriented and market-oriented, focusing on external conditions rather than primarily on internal organizational issues. Drucker (1973, p. 63) noted: Marketing is “the whole business seen from the point of view of its final result, that is, from the customer’s point of view.” Similarly, Grönroos (2026, this issue) emphasizes that when marketing is planned and executed with an outside-in focus, firms can better work for and with customers. I agree, but call for an even broader perspective: the outside-in view should consider versatile stakeholders in the markets (Aksoy et al., 2022). Marketing research today offers theoretical lenses that even abandon the traditional lexicon of customers and providers, recognizing that marketing concerns value-creation processes within complex systems of relationships, nevertheless highlighting the importance of understanding value from the perspective of *beneficiaries* of marketing (Vargo & Lusch, 2016). The outside-in worldview keeps the organization abreast of and attuned to its surrounding system, and that is the job of marketing.

### Relational and integrative orientation

The third defining property of marketing I propose is its *relational and integrative orientation*. The purpose of marketing has always been to connect sellers and buyers, evolving later into a more sophisticated understanding of the relationships among actors within the systems we call “markets” (e.g., Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995). Furthermore, the concept of market orientation highlighted the importance of interfunctional coordination (e.g., Jaworski & Kohli, 1993). Although integration is recognized as an aspect of modern marketing thinking, it is not clearly evident in the definitions of marketing. It nevertheless remains highly

relevant: marketing is uniquely the domain that integrates the organization's different elements and functions around the overarching value-creation mission, as no department or function can fulfill it in isolation. Executives, too, highlight that in today's world of fragmented customer journeys, it is pivotal that organizations have a clear chief advocate for customers who aligns all business functions—and marketing leaders are uniquely positioned to take on this role (Gardner, 2024).

In essence, marketing connects demand and supply, needs and need fulfillment, and the perspectives and goals of multiple stakeholders. This is a property that might currently be better recognized by CMOs than by academic definitions, although marketing has always focused on the connections between actors rather than any one actor alone. A lot has been discussed about the power imbalances between marketing and other functions, such as finance (e.g., Auh & Merlo, 2012), but more credit should be given to marketing's integrative role and its benefits to the organization.

## Concluding thoughts

I commend Grönroos (2026, this issue) for calling the field to critically discuss what marketing really is, as a phenomenon. Many of the reforms suggested by Grönroos (2026, this issue) are, of course, not novel – but it appears that they have not sufficiently permeated the field. Already in the 1950s, thought leaders like Peter Drucker advocated marketing as an organization-wide logic relevant for profit and non-profit organizations alike, and many subsequent turns in marketing, especially in areas such as service research, consumer culture theory, and industrial network approach have developed understanding on value creation occurring through collaborative processes by versatile actors (e.g., Håkansson & Snehota, 1989; Grönroos, 2000; Caru & Cova, 2015; Vargo & Lusch, 2016). One should ask: have these ideas not permeated the heart of marketing yet, and why is that?

It is clear that marketing scholars and practitioners see the phenomenon of marketing somewhat differently (Dibb et al., 2014). According to McKinsey's (2025) *State of Marketing Europe 2026* report, many organizations continue to emphasize established marketing functions such as brand and advertising, while lagging behind in adopting broader strategic capabilities like AI, martech integration, and full-funnel growth approaches, highlighting a still-narrow perception of marketing's role in driving business transformation. Grönroos (2026, this issue) notes that marketing has lost proper control of innovation and product management. Indeed, practitioners consider product management and marketing to be separate entities that do not get along well

(Singer, 2024). The way marketing's role is viewed in organizations warrants critical discussion. If this view becomes too narrow, scientifically developed marketing knowledge may not reach the people who are supposed to apply it. It may also prevent business students from learning the skills they will need in future business roles. Dibb et al. (2014) note that marketing textbooks often emphasize activities carried out by marketers within the marketing function, missing the broader organizational activities to which marketers and other organizational employees contribute. Therefore, we should develop a new conceptualization or definition of marketing that resonates with practitioners and makes all marketing work across the organization visible. As a starting point, I propose that *marketing is the externally oriented, integrative discipline and mindset that adopts an outside-in understanding of beneficiaries and stakeholders to guide and coordinate the creation of value within relationships and market systems*.

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