

Where were you in the revolution?





Professor Byron Sharp is one of the world's most influential marketing scientists and a leading force behind the global shift toward evidence-based marketing.

As Director of the Ehrenberg-Bass Institute of Marketing Science and author of the international bestseller *How Brands Grow: What Marketers Don't Know*, Professor Sharp has fundamentally challenged conventional thinking about how brands compete, attract customers and grow.

The Institute research has helped reshape modern marketing practice, bringing empirical evidence to questions once dominated by intuition and received wisdom. Concepts championed through their work including Mental and Physical Availability, Distinctive Brand Assets, Category Entry Points and the importance of reach have become central to the way marketers and business leaders around the world approach brand growth.

With more than 100 peer-reviewed academic papers and decades of research into buyer behaviour, advertising and brand performance, Professor Sharp's influence extends from academia into boardrooms, marketing teams and agencies globally.

His contribution to the profession has also received significant international recognition. In 2021, Marketing Week named Professor Sharp among the ten greatest marketers of the 21st century, and in 2025 he received both the European Marketing Confederation Lifetime Achievement Award and the Australian Marketing Institute's Sir Charles McGrath Award.

The Brands Lecture

8 September 2026

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Byron Sharp

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It is slightly daunting to follow the previous Brands Lectures. Last year, Grant Reid talked about how Mars had applied evidence-based marketing principles in practice. Mars was already a substantial business when the Ehrenberg-Bass Institute first began working with it, but since then it has grown enormously across snacking, pet care, food and veterinary health. I am not going to claim credit for that, but perhaps the work gave Mars some confidence: confidence that it was not simply a company that happened to be very good at running factories and making pet food or chocolate, but one that understood how brands grow and could apply those principles elsewhere.

Then I looked at Mark Ritson's lecture from the year before. Category Entry Points. Distinctive Brand Assets. Distinctiveness rather than an obsession with differentiation. Sophisticated mass marketing. He had rather stolen my thunder. Although, as academics are required to do, I should correct him on three points.

First, Category Entry Points are not mine. That is very definitely the work of Jenni Romaniuk and her collaborators. Second, Ehrenberg-Bass does not say differentiation does not exist. What the evidence tells us is that its effects in markets are generally much smaller than marketers have traditionally assumed. Differentiation that really matters tends to be rather obvious. Show an eight-year-old a Maserati and a Toyota Corolla and they will probably identify some differences. Put two broadly similar family cars beside each other and things become rather harder.

Third, sophisticated mass marketing does not mean targeting only those people who are currently in the market. If you sell sails, clearly you are interested in people who own yachts. The relevant mass

market is everyone who buys, or could buy, the category. The word sophisticated is there because mass marketing has too often been caricatured as treating everybody identically. It never really meant that. People live in different places, speak different languages and consume different media. Sometimes those differences matter and you have to take account of them. But be careful not to overdo it, because complexity costs money.

Before the revolution

For a long time, marketing theory was dominated by ideas that sounded plausible: brand personality, brand love, Lovemarks, purpose, archetypes, semiotics, personas, brand onions and ladders. An enormous theoretical apparatus grew up around brands. Academics should have acted as impartial referees, testing these ideas against the real world. Instead, too many became intoxicated by them. Business schools were invaded by cultural theorists and psychologists, sometimes people who appeared rather suspicious of business itself, and the result was theory piled upon theory.

Take brand personality. Consumers can certainly be persuaded to attribute human characteristics to brands, but Jenni Romaniuk has repeatedly shown how weak many of those associations actually are. Researchers have even demonstrated that people will attribute personalities to rocks if you ask them to. Consumers are helpful. Give them a questionnaire and they will generally try to answer it. That does not necessarily mean the construct you are measuring is important.

Alongside the cultural theorists came what I think of as the growth fantasists. Growth would

come through more persuasive advertising, more precise personalisation, greater differentiation, increased loyalty or reduced price sensitivity. Or perhaps through simply persuading every existing customer to buy one more product. I met the CMO of a major bank recently whose new chief executive had essentially proposed exactly that as a growth strategy: sell one more product to every customer.

It sounds seductively simple. Wells Fargo tried something rather like it, and that ended with billions of dollars in fines and settlements and employees creating accounts customers had never asked for. The problem was not that employees needed to try harder. The targets themselves were detached from the realities of buying behaviour.

The same idea appears in consumer goods. If the average customer buys us 2.7 times a year, why not make it 3.7? It is only one extra purchase. Again, it sounds wonderfully straightforward. Unfortunately, growth is rarely that obliging.

Advertising is not magic

Marketing also has a tendency to exaggerate the immediate power of advertising, and advertising effectiveness case studies sometimes encourage this. You see analyses suggesting remarkably strong relationships between advertising expenditure and the number of business effects achieved: more sales, more profit, more market share. Sometimes the results look suspiciously perfect.

The problem is that large advertising campaigns tend to accompany large business events. If Toyota spends years and billions of dollars developing a new model, builds factories, establishes distribution and then invests heavily in launch advertising, the

subsequent sales cannot sensibly be attributed to advertising alone. Likewise, if a campaign coincides with a major price reduction, ignoring the price reduction because competitors were discounting too is not terribly convincing science.

The scientific evidence on the short-term sales elasticity of advertising is much more modest. That does not mean advertising does not work. It means advertising does not normally work by magically causing large numbers of people to buy next week. Most people exposed to your advertising are not about to buy the category. Advertising works primarily through memory. It contributes to Mental Availability so that, when someone eventually does enter a buying situation, your brand has a slightly greater probability of being noticed or thought of.

Things that alter Physical Availability – opening or closing stores, changing distribution or running a price promotion – can show up immediately in sales. Advertising generally works differently, and that distinction matters.

Marketing needs science

Science is really quite simple. You go into the real world and measure things, then you do it again and again across different conditions, markets and circumstances. Eventually, if something keeps repeating, you begin to identify regularities: scientific laws. Once you understand the conditions under which those laws hold, you can begin making predictions.

That is where science becomes enormously useful. Engineers were not interested in science merely because it generated elegant theories. They became interested because it allowed them to predict what would happen. Marketing has rather the opposite

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problem. Human beings are exceptionally good at creating theories, and there are hundreds upon hundreds of theories cited in marketing journals. We are very capable of sitting in a chair and developing a plausible explanation for something. What matters is whether it corresponds with repeated observations of the real world.

Water boils at around 100°C at sea level. The shape of the pan does not matter, nor does the size of the pan, but altitude does. Understanding those conditions gives us genuine insight. Marketing should aspire to the same thing.

The fundamentals travel

One of the most important findings from marketing science is how frequently the same fundamental patterns appear across apparently very different markets. People often ask whether the principles of Mental and Physical Availability really apply in their particular category. Luxury must be different. B2B must be different. Asia must be different. Tiny brands must be different. Disruptors must be different. Music must be different.

Of course every market has its own characteristics. If you manage a business, you need to understand the industry you operate in. But underneath those idiosyncrasies, the fundamentals are remarkably consistent. Take luxury. It is often argued that luxury brands must restrict distribution to preserve exclusivity. Yet when we examine the market, the largest luxury brands tend to have extensive Physical Availability. They are in airports and duty-free shops around the world and have thousands of points of distribution. Restricting physical availability does not magically produce growth.

B2B has its own challenges – particularly the difficulty of achieving broad media reach – but businesses still have to create Mental and Physical Availability. Disruptors enter markets and appear extraordinary for a while, then remarkably quickly the patterns of buying around them start looking rather normal. Music is supposed to be highly polarised, yet people have broad repertoires. Someone who listens to heavy metal may also listen to Ariana Grande, Beyoncé or Beethoven. People are much less neatly segmented than marketers would often like them to be.

The strange reality of loyalty

One particularly important example is loyalty. For decades, marketing theory suggested that differentiation created loyalty. If consumers did not perceive meaningful differences between brands, why would they keep choosing the same ones? It sounds logical, but the real world is strange. People are loyal even when they cannot articulate any meaningful differentiation at all.

Think about your supermarket trolley. A large supermarket contains tens of thousands of products, yet over the course of a year you buy only a fraction of them. You repeatedly return to a familiar repertoire. If everybody had to abandon their trolleys during a fire alarm and then returned later, you could probably identify yours remarkably quickly. It contains your brands. Other people's trolleys contain slightly strange things.

This habitual behaviour appears everywhere. People return to the same chair in a lecture theatre. They develop different preferred seats for different classes. Some people care passionately about which

way toilet paper hangs. Ask why and there is often no great emotional or rational explanation. It is simply what they do.

That matters enormously for branding because consumers cannot repeat-buy a brand unless they can identify it. Branding allows the natural patterns of repeat buying – what we describe as polygamous loyalty, because consumers normally buy from a repertoire rather than one brand exclusively – to operate. And that takes us to mental availability.

Mental Availability is not awareness

Awareness has traditionally been treated almost as a hurdle. Once you are Coca-Cola, everybody has heard of you, so the job is supposedly done. But that is not how memory works. Almost everyone in Britain may know Coca-Cola, yet walk into a coffee shop and the probability that Coca-Cola comes to mind may be surprisingly low.

That is interesting because a coffee shop is somewhere people buy drinks, often caffeinated drinks. Coke would seem perfectly relevant, but other memories dominate. Mental Availability is therefore not a simple yes-or-no measure of awareness. It is the probability that a buyer will notice, recognise or think of a brand in a buying situation.

That probability changes according to circumstances and cues. The marketing task is therefore to build and refresh the memory structures that link the brand to relevant buying situations. This is where category entry points become so useful: they help us understand the cues that lead buyers into the category and therefore the memories a brand needs to build.

Looking like yourself

There is another major contribution from the evidence-based marketing revolution that ought, by now, to be uncontroversial. Brands need to look like themselves. We call this distinctiveness, and distinctiveness is built through Distinctive Brand Assets: colours, shapes, characters, typefaces, sounds, packaging structures, words, logos and anything else that helps a buyer recognise the brand.

This sounds obvious, yet for decades the discipline paid remarkably little attention to systematically measuring and managing those assets. Procter & Gamble made one of the great organisational innovations in marketing when it created the brand manager. Consumer goods companies around the world copied the model because having someone responsible for the stewardship of a brand was clearly useful. Yet historically, remarkably few brand managers could tell you, from measurement, which of their assets were genuinely distinctive.

They were managing assets they had never measured. Imagine explaining that to a colleague in finance. Which elements identify our brand? We think the bottle shape. Perhaps the colour. How do we know? We think so. Why did we change one of them last year? Well...

Marketing has too often been a discipline without enough discipline. Distinctive Assets need to be identified, measured, protected and consistently used, and Jenni Romaniuk deserves enormous credit for putting this at the centre of modern brand management.

Yet academia is still catching up. A review of 86 university marketing and brand management

textbooks found surprisingly little serious treatment of Distinctive Brand Assets. Many did not mention even the basic building blocks such as logos and colours, and virtually none properly discussed their measurement and management. That should worry us.

The American Marketing Association's long-standing definition gets reasonably close to the essence of a brand: a name, term, design, symbol or other feature that identifies one seller's goods or services from another's. It is strikingly practical. Branding is about identification, and identification has enormous commercial value.

The real world is weird

This is perhaps the central point. The real world is weird, and marketing itself is weird. For most of human history people lived in relatively small communities and communicated with relatively small numbers of people. Modern marketers are trying to communicate with millions, sometimes billions. There is no reason to assume our intuition evolved to make us good at that. Indeed, if an idea about marketing feels irresistibly intuitive, that should sometimes make us suspicious.

Most important scientific discoveries were surprising when they arrived. People once believed diseases such as cholera were spread through bad smells. It felt plausible because foul-smelling places were often unhealthy places. Then John Snow demonstrated here in London that cholera was being transmitted through contaminated water. Once we know the answer, it seems obvious. Beforehand it did not. Marketing needs the same willingness to discover that the world does not behave as we expect it to.

Why become evidence-based?

Why does any of this matter? Because evidence increases the odds of success and reduces the probability of doing something catastrophically stupid. Wells Fargo's cross-selling targets are an extreme example. Management repeatedly demanded behaviour that the underlying market made extraordinarily difficult, and employees eventually found another way of hitting the numbers. Evidence protects against that kind of fantasy.

It also gives organisations confidence. Mars is a good example. Understanding some of the fundamentals of how brands grow provided greater confidence that those skills could be applied to different categories and businesses. Evidence can also liberate creativity.

Consider winemaking. For centuries, a winemaker might make an exceptional wine one year and vinegar the next without really understanding why. If a black cat happened to wander through the winery during the successful vintage, there was no harm in making sure the cat came back next year. When you do not understand cause and effect, superstition becomes rational. You repeat everything because you do not know which bit mattered.

Modern winemakers understand processes such as malolactic fermentation. They can decide whether they want sharper malic acidity or softer lactic acidity. Understanding the science gives them more freedom, not less. The same should be true of marketing. Evidence does not reduce creativity. It tells you which things are fundamentals and which things you are free to change.

That ought to make marketers more ambitious. We now live in an extraordinary period. For perhaps the first time, marketing genuinely knows some things. Not everything, but some things. We know there are recurring laws of buying behaviour. We know that brands grow principally by expanding their customer base. We know buyers are polygamously loyal. We know Mental and Physical Availability matter. We know distinctiveness matters. We know that small brands are not condemned to remain small and large brands are not invincible.

And we know that growth is hard. It is relatively easy for management to increase profit in the short term: cut costs and the result appears almost immediately. Increasing sales is much harder because you cannot simply order customers to buy more. That is precisely why marketing matters.

A business growing both its top line and its bottom line is valuable because it demonstrates something more than short-term efficiency. It demonstrates that customers are choosing it. That is a business with a future.

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This is the twenty third in the Brands Lecture series. Previous lectures include:

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Tim Ambler, London Business School

Posh Spice and Persil

Jeremy Bullmore, WPP Group

100% marketing

Rob Malcolm, Diageo

Hybrids, the heavenly bed and purple ketchup

David Aaker, Prophet

Brands beyond business

Simon Anholt, Earthspeak

The Lovemarks effect

Kevin Roberts, Saatchi & Saatchi

They think it's all over...

Martin Glenn, Birds Eye Iglo Group Limited

In brands we trust

Lord Bilimoria CBE DL, Cobra Beer

Can brands save the world? Let's hope so.

Richard Reed, Innocent Drinks

Brand new: Innovation in a challenging world

Fiona Dawson, Mars Chocolate

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