
Kotler is dead!

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“Bastards!”

“Sorry?”

“My students are bastards.”

“Customers, Alan. They’re our customers. I know you’ve only been with us for a short while, but *we* call them customers. This is supposed to be a marketing department, remember?”

“Sorry, Professor Kotler. I’m sorry. But I just can’t believe it. I got the impression that the students liked my lectures. Christ, what have I done to deserve this?”

“Well, marketing theory and thought has always been a difficult module.”

“Yes, I know. The students told me all about its terrible reputation. Dry, abstract, badly taught. For God’s sake, they *said* they enjoyed my lectures. I even got a round of applause one afternoon.”

“Well ... I’m sure you did Alan. However, the results of the student evaluation exercise are in and I’m afraid you’ve got a very low score. Even lower than when I used to teach marketing theory.”

“Oh Jesus, I’m really sorry, Professor Kotler. I didn’t mean to imply ... ”

“No, Alan, I’m sure you didn’t. Call me Phil.”

“A low score you say, er, Phil?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“How low?”

“*Very* low, Alan.”

“Even lower than Chase’s course on quantitative methods?”

“Now, let’s not get cheeky, young man. Dr Chase is a senior member of staff with an international reputation. His is a model module, if you’ll pardon the expression.”

“But he talks nineteen to the dozen, for heaven’s sake. The students have all sorts of names for him and his lectures – Wild Goose Chase, Somnambulance Chasing ... ”

“I didn’t hear that, *Mr* Smithee. And, for your information, your evaluation was considerably worse than *Dr* Chase’s.”

“Jesus, that’s bad.”

“Yes, you could say that.”

“So, what happens now Professor ... Phil?”

“Well, Alan, let’s look on the bright side. There’s another six months of your contract to run. We won’t be making a decision until then. I’m sure it will be extended. You have every opportunity to make amends in the new semester. I have every confidence in you, every confidence.”

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“Thank you, Phil. So, you’re going to let me take the marketing theory module next semester?”

“Yes, I think so. We always give people a second chance at Alloa Met. Fair’s fair, though you might want to consider a couple of minor changes to the content.”

“Pardon?”

“Tiny adjustments, that’s all Alan.”

“What *adjustments* do you have in mind?”

“Not so much adjustments, tweaking really.”

“How can I *tweak* the course to your satisfaction, Professor Kotler?”

“Well – and this is just a suggestion, you understand – you might want to modify your treatment of the Kotlerite position.”

“The Kotlerite position? Is that some sort of strange sexual contortion?”

“Very funny, you know exactly what I mean.”

“Well, oh God, I don’t quite know how to put this sir, but there is a sort of, er, growing anti-Kotlerite sentiment out there and I think our students should be exposed to the latest developments in marketing thought, even if they are uncomfortable for some of us. Don’t you agree?”

“A growing anti-Kotlerite sentiment, you say?”

“Yes, well, there are certain people who think that the Kotlerite approach has led the discipline astray. Basically, they don’t believe that the marketing concept can be applied to everything under the sun – places, people, religion and so on.”

“Do these people think that the marketing concept *can’t* be applied to places, people and what have you?”

“I don’t think it’s a question of whether it can or can’t, Professor Kotler. It’s a question of whether it *should* be applied or not.”

“Who are these people, exactly?”

“Well, Brown for one. He argues that the intellectual imperialism of the past is part of the reason our discipline is still held in such low academic esteem. It’s really quite funny ... he talks about Coca-Kotlerization, Ku Klux Kotler, King Kong Kotler ... if you like that sort of thing, that is.”

“Brown?”

“Stephen Brown.”

“Oh yes. I’ve heard of him. Irish guy. He’s the one that reads dirty books and uses the F word in his papers.”

“Yeah, that’s him. It’s radical, isn’t it?”

“No, frankly, it’s not radical. It’s juvenile. It’s infantile. We don’t need that sort of filthy talk in the marketing academy. If that’s his idea of academic esteem, I think we’re much better off where we are.”

“But he does it in order to draw attention to the language we employ, the fact that we make a conscious choice to write in an academic fashion. Brown calls it the art of artless writing.”

“Yes, that’s just the sort of meaningless phrase he’d come up with. We can do without the Quentin Tarantula school of marketing scholarship, thank you very much.”

“Tarantino. It’s Quentin Tarantino.”

“I was right the first time.”

“Very good, Professor Kotler. I like it. You closet postmodernist, you!”

“Modernist I may be Alan, postmodernist I am definitely not. Pretentious bunch of know-nothing pseudo-intellectuals. They’ve read, or claim to have read, a couple of books by obscurantist French philosophers and then they contend that marketing is in some sort of crisis. What’s their rallying cry, again? Oh yes, the fundamental issue is not marketing myopia but the myopia of marketing. We’re not that myopic. We can see exactly what they’re up to ... self-aggrandisement, that’s what they’re up to.”

“Well, I don’t know about that, sir. It seems to me that Firat’s description of marketing in a fragmented, paradoxical postmodern world is a better reflection of what’s happening in today’s business environment than anything you’ll find in the *Journal of Marketing Research*. And, if you ask me, *JMR* can do a pretty good impersonation of obscurantism when it wants to.”

“That’s not the point. The point is that people like Firat are intellectual butterflies, flitting from fad to fad. One minute he’s a relativist, then he’s a Marxist, now he’s a postmodernist. What next, a post-postmodernist?, A pre-postmodernist?, neo-postmodernist?, A post-neo-postmodernist?”

“I take it this means you want me to drop my lecture on postmodern marketing theory.”

“That’s entirely up to you, Alan.”

“Can I ask you something, Professor Kotler?”

“Of course.”

“Just what exactly is wrong with exploring new ideas? You were pretty good at it yourself when you were younger.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Well sir, if I may say so, you made your name with the managerial paradigm. You challenged the dominant institutional and commodity schools of marketing thought. Then you exploited your managerial perspective to the hilt – and why not? What was that series of books you wrote in the 1970s and 1980s? *In Search of Marketing Management*, *When Marketing Managers Learn to Dance*, *The Competitive Advantage of Marketing Managers*, *Liberation Marketing*, *Total Quality Marketing Management*, *Reengineering the Marketing Manager*. They’re great books, classics, but come on Professor Kotler, you can’t take umbrage when other people do the same.”

“I’m not sure I agree with your interpretation of events. The difference between me and the likes of Brown and Firat is that I was trying to spread the marketing message, not undermine it. I didn’t try to make a name for myself by rubbishing my elders and betters. I built on what had gone before. We don’t need their type in marketing science.”

“Well, I would have thought it fell within the remit of the exchange paradigm. Isn’t marketing supposed to be the science of exchange? It seems to me that 1960s-style marketing megalomania is coming home to roost. If you claim that marketing is relevant to everything, you can’t complain when people take you at your word and then use your word to undermine your claim.”

“What about Holbrook?”

“Well, I must say, I agree with you there, er, Phil. I’m not sure that I share his views on practising managers. He seems to think that any dealings with managers are hopelessly compromised, which simply isn’t the case. However, he writes beautifully and at least he treats his readership with respect. Most of the stuff we foist upon marketing managers is an insult to the intelligence.”

“Am I supposed to take that remark personally?”

“No, no, good Lord no. Your *Dot-to-Dot Book of Marketing Planning* and *Dick and Dora Become Brand Managers* are classics of their type. They make McDonald’s *Marketing by Matrix* look like the work of an amateur.”

“Good book, *Marketing by Matrix*. Damn fine book. An example to us all.”

“One of the high-water marks of post-war marketing scholarship.”

“Couldn’t agree more. You know, if you put your mind to it, Alan, I’m sure you could do something equally outstanding.”

“Thank you, sir, I appreciate your confidence in my ability.”

“Did I tell you about my latest project?”

“No, Professor Kotler, what’s that?”

“It’s an introduction to marketing written in the style of Winnie the Pooh. The publishers love it.”

“Let me guess, *The Pooh of Marketing*? Now there’s a title to conjure with.”

“Young man, the thing you must understand is that marketing managers are very busy people. They don’t have time to plough their way through reams of impenetrable text. You have to grab their attention and get your points across as succinctly and entertainingly as possible. You have to give the customers what they want, after all.”

“In my experience, Professor Kotler, marketing managers are quick and intelligent. Many, if not most of them are graduates – non-business graduates. I think it’s safe to assume that they are familiar with complex concepts and words of more than one syllable, not that they’ll find too many of those in most marketing textbooks.”

“Don’t exaggerate.”

“OK two syllables, but only in the theoretical chapters. Why do we insist on talking down to practitioners? We treat them like children. In fact, I’m not so sure that we are giving them what they want. All the books are exactly the same, bandoliered in bullet-points. They are undistinguished and indistinguishable.”

“I think you mean intertextual, Alan.”

“What? What did you just say?”

“Intertextual, isn’t that what O’Donohoe calls it? One text alluding to another.”

“One marketing textbook regurgitating another is not my idea of intertextuality, sir.”

“Oh, so it’s intertextual when postmodernists do it, but mindless recycling when the rest of us do the same thing?”

“No, no, you misunderstand. Intertextuality is characterized by wit, panache, subtlety. Thompson’s wonderful play on Brown’s not-so-wonderful book is a perfect example of what I mean . . . ”

“Frankly, I thought Brown was playing with himself. I don’t know why Thompson wanted to get in on the act.”

“I think you’ll find they’re just good friends, Professor Kotler.”

“Quite. Let *me* ask *you* something, young man. If postmodernists reject the idea of authorial innovation and suggest instead that we are forever condemned to repeat what others have done before us, how can they possibly have a problem with one marketing textbook cloning another?”

“For someone who detests it so much, you seem to know an awful lot about postmodernism. You’re not planning a book on *Postmodern Marketing Management*, are you, sir?”

“No, no, I don’t think managers are quite ready for that sort of thing.”

“You know something, Professor Kotler, I reckon marketing managers laugh at us and our half-baked concepts.”

“You do, do you?”

“Yes I do and it’s not just me. Brownlie says that practitioners just string us along. Whenever academic researchers come along to interview them, they spout the marketing rhetoric of analysis, planning, implementation and control. The interviewers go away thinking that the marketing message is finally getting through, that salvation is at hand. Meanwhile, the managers are laughing up their sleeves at us. They are very good at disgorging marketing when it suits them, but it doesn’t make a blind bit of difference to their day-to-day activities.”

“Brownlie? Douglas Brownlie? I saw Brownlie once at a conference. He started off by bursting into song, pretty tuneless it was too, and then started crawling around the floor and barking like a dog.”

“Yeah, that sounds like Dougie.”

“That chap *is* barking. What will he do next? Swing from a trapeze, whilst reciting bad poetry, perhaps?”

“Maybe he’ll do it Winnie the Pooh style.”

“That’s quite enough, young man! You just don’t seem to get it, do you? The difference between me and the likes of Brownlie is that I *believe* in marketing. I have tried to spread the marketing word. Instead of complaining and doubting, you and your generation should try to do the same. Heaven only knows, it’s needed. Have you any idea of the depth of ignorance out there?”

“So, all we need is a marketing crusade and the promised land of marketing orientation will be ours.”

“No, you forgot something.”

“Pseudo-science, surely.”

“Yes, that reminds me. I understand you’ve been very critical of scientific marketing and suggest that we all become more artistic in orientation. What sort of nonsense is that? Talk like that undermines 50 years of marketing progress. Some very good people, some very good friends of mine, have devoted their lives to advancing marketing science and now you – *you* – are telling them that they’ve been wasting their time.”

“I don’t think it is nonsense, sir. What has marketing science achieved exactly? What has it done for marketing practitioners? All it has produced is a pile of unreadable papers and unimplementable advice. Is marketing any closer to being anointed by the scientific community at large than it was 50 years ago? Have the hard sciences welcomed marketing into the fold? I don’t think so. Do we really want to be considered scientific anymore? Science doesn’t exactly have the bright and shining, we-have-the-technology reputation it had in the 1960s, you know.”

“I think you’ll find that we did some pretty good work in the 1960s. At least we had a sense of purpose. At least we tried to move things forward. All you and your postmodernist chums seem to want to do is make snide remarks and write bad poetry.”

“What’s wrong with poetry, Professor Kotler? If you ask me, great poets provide a better insight into human behaviour than any number of self-important marketing scientists with their have-LISREL-will-travel machismo.”

“I said bad poetry.”

“Literary critic as well as Nobel Laureate? My, my.”

“Mind your manners young man!”

“Sorry, Professor Kotler, sorry. Excuse me. I got a bit carried away. I’m afraid I feel pretty strongly about this.”

“Hmm ... so I see.”

“But, you know, look, um ... don’t get me wrong, marketing science was a noble aspiration in its day. But its day has passed.”

“I’m not sure that too many people would agree with you there.”

“Well, maybe it’s a generational thing.”

“So, you’re telling me I’m past it now. Shall I collect my pension book on the way out this evening?, or do the noble thing?”

“No, no, not at all. It’s not that. It’s not that. It’s just that I honestly believe people like Morris Holbrook or Bob Grafton Small, people who write in a creative fashion, have far more to say to practising marketers than the pseudo-scientists, the artless wonders.”

“Holbrook? Grafton Small? Be sensible, Alan.”

“What do you mean, Professor Kotler?”

“Holbrook is the very person who wants to sever all links with marketing practitioners and Grafton Small is an anthropologist in marketer’s clothing. Who cares about sandals made out of rubber tires, for goodness sake? What’s that got to do with marketing?”

“What’s that, Professor Kotler?”
“We have to burn the marketing heretics at the stake.”
“I see.”
“Good, I’m glad.”
“I think I’m beginning to catch your drift.”
“You’re a bright chap, Alan. Lots of potential. Don’t destroy your career before it gets started.”
“Are there any other *adjustments* you’d like me to make in the marketing theory module, sir?”
“Well, now that you mention it, there are a couple more things that you might want to attend to.”
“Oh yes?”
“Yes, I’m a bit concerned about all that stuff on sexuality.”
“What?”
“Sexuality, Alan.”
“Do you mean my lecture on feminist approaches? You can’t be serious. You want to impose an embargo on feminism? Are you for real?”
“No, no, not the feminist stuff. I may be old fashioned, but I’m not that politically incorrect. I think it is vitally necessary to refer to the women’s movement and the invaluable insights feminism brings to the marketing academy, even ... ”
“Even though you don’t believe a word of it.”
“I wasn’t thinking that, Alan, nor would I say such a thing.”
“Even though you’d never think of promoting a woman to a senior position within this department, or a professorship for that matter.”
“Promotions are not within my gift, as you well know. Each and every appointment, each extension of contract, is made in an objective, rigorous and dispassionate fashion. Student evaluations, for example, are taken into very careful account ... ”
“But the fact of the matter is that we only have one female member of staff.”
“Sadly, yes.”
“And, despite a publications record that is second to none, she is still a very junior member of staff.”
“I’m sorry, I can’t discuss individual cases, even though I know you have a personal interest in this particular matter.”
“The fact that my partner has published several papers on the phallogocentric premisses of the managerial paradigm has had absolutely no influence on your objective, rigorous and dispassionate promotions procedure?”
“None whatsoever.”
“I see.”
“I knew you would.”
“If it’s not the feminist lecture you’re concerned about, Professor Kotler, which one is it?”
“I’m somewhat anxious about the one on desire.”

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“Desire?”

“Yes, desire, eroticism ... the one where you show all the pornographic slides.”

“But that’s my best lecture, that’s the one that got the round of applause.”

“So you say.”

“It did! And the slides are not pornographic, by the way. They are all adverts taken from popular magazines.”

“Are they really?”

“Professor Kotler, are you seriously suggesting that eroticism is not part and parcel of contemporary marketing, that marketing practitioners don’t use sex to sell? Haagan Dazs, Lee Jeans, Scottish Widows, Cadbury’s Flake, Mr Sheen furniture polish, for Christ’s sake.”

“They may well do, but this is meant to be an institute of *higher* education, not a peepshow. Remember that, Alan.”

“Some of the greatest thinkers in the Western intellectual tradition have examined the nature of sexuality, the eroticism of possessions, the desire to consume, the carnality of consumption – Marx, Freud, Baudrillard. This stuff is very relevant to marketing, very, very relevant.”

“Well, there’s not too much of it in the *Journal of Marketing*.”

“Surprise, surprise. But, you know, there are a number of marketing academics who are writing about such things. Richard Elliott, for example, says that ... ”

“That’s the consumer research fellow from Oxford?”

“Yeah, that’s him.”

“What on earth does Oxford know about business and management? Johnny-come-latelies. Come to think of it, what on earth do consumer researchers know about business and management? I thought they’d gone walkabout. Sorry, the Odyssey, isn’t that what they call it?”

“That was ten years ago.”

“Doesn’t time fly when you’re enjoying yourself?”

“Professor Kotler, my PhD thesis is on consumer research, as you well know.”

“Indeed I do, Alan. Indeed I do. What’s it called again?”

“*The Postmodern Tribe: Fact or Artefact?*”

“Now, *there’s* a title to conjure with.”

“You don’t like it, then?”

“The thesis or the title?”

“Well, the thesis.”

“It’s a bit too early to say. I’ve only read the first 50 pages.”

“Oh, I see.”

“It’s very ... ”

“Interesting, sir?”

“No, no, no.”

“It’s *not* interesting?”

“No, no, you misunderstand me. It’s very, ah, it’s very, hmm, how can I put this? It’s very ... postmodern.”

“It’s very burn-them-at-the-stake, is that what you mean?”

“Now, now, let’s not prejudge things, young man. I haven’t finished it yet. And, anyway, I’m just the chairman of your panel. I don’t have any influence on the outcome of your viva, none whatsoever.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Oh, that reminds me, did I tell you that Professor Cova is unable to act as your external examiner?”

“*What?*”

“Yes, I know. I know. It’s unfortunate that he had to withdraw at this late stage.”

“Jesus!”

“Not to worry, Alan. I’m sure we’ll find a suitable stand-in. I have lots of favours to call upon. Not to worry. We’ll find someone.”

“I’m sure you will.”

“What do you mean by that tone of voice?”

“You know exactly what I mean.”

“What are you implying, *young man?*”

“Let *me* ask *you* something, Professor Kotler.”

“Make it quick.”

“Did the students *really* score me so badly?”

“I’m afraid so. The figures are in front of you.”

“But I had to leave the lecture theatre while you carried out the exercise.”

“Perfectly normal procedure.”

“It took an awfully long time.”

“About average, I would have thought.”

“You didn’t take the opportunity to disparage my approach, by any chance?”

“Don’t be absurd.”

“You didn’t threaten the students with the consequences of adopting postmodernism?”

“What on earth are you talking about?”

“In their examination papers, for example, which *you* second mark. And which are externalled by one of *your* cronies.”

“I think you’re seriously out of line young man. You’re obviously under a lot of strain. You’ve been working too hard to finish your thesis, Mr Smithee. Now go away, calm down and I’ll look forward to receiving your apology in the morning.”

“You’re going to shaft me on the PhD as well, aren’t you, you old bastard?”

“How dare you talk to me like that, Smithee! How dare you!”

“Let me tell you something for nothing, *Phil.*”

“This interview is *over*, young man. Close the door behind you.”

“You may think you’re something special, but you’re not. You’re a has-been. You’re a never-was. Everyone knows you only got your job because Alloa Met. thought you were *the* Phil Kotler, the *real* Phil Kotler. What sort of name is Phileas, anyway? Phileas Fuck, if you ask me”.

“I’m going, Phil. But if you fuck around with my thesis, I’ll fucking kill you ... ”

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