

# ***Are marketing's metaphors good for it?***

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Marketing is a rich mix of metaphors, ranging from Customer is King and Brand DNA to the ostensibly immortal Product Life Cycle. Metaphors are generally regarded as “a good thing”, since today’s so-called Creative Economy is predicated on analogical thinking and imaginative juxtapositions. Metaphors obscure as much as they illuminate, however, and it is arguable that the profusion of contradictory metaphors is adversely affecting marketing’s development. The Relationship Marketing metaphor, for example, is not only inappropriate but damaging in certain situations. This paper steps back from the search for new and improved metaphors and asks whether marketing’s metaphors are good for it.

**Keywords** Metaphor, Mixed metaphors, Metaphorical overkill, Elephantine marketing

## **For what we are about to receive**

Awesome. The lines were awesome. They stretched down the street, round the block and along adjoining thoroughfares. Every store was the same, all 164 of them. The TV crews were there, religiously grabbing shots of the scene. Roving radio reporters chatted to the murmuring multitudes. Reverential journalists wrote about the wondrous event in worshipful terms, as true believers do (Armstrong 2007; Ashton and Rushe 2007; Waugh 2008).

Better yet, the disciples in line were benevolent, imbued with the milk and honey of human kindness. There was no stampede when the stores’ doors finally opened, only a hallelujah or two. There was no mass panic to get hold of the miraculous merchandise, just a patient wait among the shuffling supplicants. There were no blinding lights or burning bushes or hosannas on the highest when the blessed vessel was finally revealed in all its numinous glory, though there might well have been.

They were waiting for the “Jesus Phone”, after all. It was the year of our Lord 2007 and the long-awaited Apple iPhone was finally going on sale. A combination camera, mobile, MP3 player and web-browsing device, with touch-screen technology and lashings of look-at-me allure, the iPhone was Apple’s most immaculate conception yet. The original iPod was made in heaven, the iPod Nano was simply divine, but when the iPhone descended from Cupertino wreathed in clouds of consumer rapture, anti-Zune zealots

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throughout the land rejoiced at the altar rail of retail and prayed that they'd be among the chosen few. Because there weren't enough iPhones to go round.

Oh for a loaves and fishes scenario.

### **Heaven on hold**

Most brand marketers, let's be honest, would sell their souls for a product like the "Jesus Phone". The adoration, the glorification, the deification, the exultation that Apple enjoys in general, and the iPhone fomented in particular, is surely the Holy Grail of marketing endeavour, the Turin Shroud of selling. Turning purchasers into worshippers is the corporate equivalent of paradise, albeit harder than hell to attain.

There are many reasons for Apple's hallowed marketing record. These include a messianic CEO, a remarkable litany of ineffable products and a temptingly impious policy of restricting supply and raising prices, which not only precipitates a surge in demand but unfailingly generates gotta-have-it buzz that builds and builds and builds as the release date beckons (Kahney 2006). The empyrean company's eschewal of conventional marketing research is also an important factor. Apple firmly believes that consumers – even the most IT-savvy consumers – can only talk in terms of the familiar, the known, the existing. Hence the profusion of me-too products extruded by market research-led organisations. Breakthrough products, disruptive innovations, next-level technologies do not come from focus groups or data mining exercises. They come from flashes of inspiration that, if not quite celestial, are undeniably sublime. As Steve Jobs famously observed, "*Had Thomas Edison relied on consumer research, he'd have come up with bigger candles, not light bulbs*" (Young and Simon 2007). And Alexander Graham Bell, presumably, would have built a better bullhorn.

Such ecclesiastical comparisons may be considered sacrilegious by some, especially those who deem consumerism sinful and brand worship profane (Applebaum 2004; Klein 2001; Ritzer 1999). But it cannot be denied that the holy aura around Apple is integral to its success. Metaphors are extremely powerful figures of speech and religious metaphors are more powerful than most (Punter 2007). The theological trope that pervades people's perception of Apple – induced from the start by its knowing echo of the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden – helps protect the company from quarterly crucifixion by the Pontius Pilates of Wall Street. Its users are eager evangelists, who consider themselves the IT elect, absolved from the devilish worms, viruses and spam monsters that torment the sinners on Windows. Steve Jobs may be a fierce and terrible god, whose vengefulness is allegedly unbounded, but he can work hi-tech miracles, he parts the Red Sea during his annual Macworld sermons and no doubt cures the sick, heals the lame and raises the dead in his spare time.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This devotional analogy, needless to say, could be infinitely extended. The famous parable of Steve Jobs' trials is an exemplary case in point. He was cast out of the Celestial City of Cupertino and persecuted in the seventh circle of Hollywood Hell, only to return like a prodigal son – a postmodern Moses, rather – to lead his fallen company to the Holy Land of burgeoning popularity and limitless profitability (see Belk and Tumbat 2003).

Pick up thy iMac and walk.

### Taking the mickey

The theological trope is just one among many, moreover. As a quick perusal of the principal principles textbooks reveals, marketing thinking is brimming with metaphors. The marketing mix (cooking), the 4Ps (alchemy), the Product Life Cycle (biology), marketing myopia (medicine), the wheel of retailing (transportation), viral marketing (epidemiology), buzz marketing (apiary), brand personality (psychology), guerrilla marketing (warfare), stealth marketing (espionage), relationship marketing (marriage), consumer information processing (computers), the foundations of marketing theory (architecture) and many more bear witness to the bubbling tureen of marketing thought (see Kitchen 2008).<sup>2</sup>

In addition to the toil and trouble of marketing thinking, marketing practice is replete with figures of speech. Advertising, for instance, is anthropomorphism incarnate, what with its ceaselessly cavorting cavalcade of Andrex puppies, Budweiser frogs, Fiat pandas, Caterpillar dump trucks, chain-smoking Camels, cornflake chomping tigers, Coke-quaffing polar bears, ice cream-slurping chunky monkeys, Hello Kitty cuddly toys and Energiser bunnies that just keep going and going and going (see for e.g. Durgee and Chen 2006; Hirschman 2007; Zaltman 2003; Zaltman and Zaltman 2008).

Branding, in fact, is inherently metaphoric. Describing one thing in terms of another is what metaphors do (argument is war, life is a circle, bureaucracy is an iron cage) and successfully branded products, services, organisations, countries, cities, celebrities and suchlike do exactly the same (Brown 2005). Volvo is safety, BMW is performance, Virgin is fun, Marlboro is freedom, Levi's is rugged, Versace is sex, Paris is style, New York is energy, Australia is earthy, Donald Trump is gaudy, Madonna is metamorphic, Kotler is king. Just as metaphors often describe abstract phenomena in concrete terms (time is money, love is a rose) so too abstract characteristics become embodied in products and services (magic means Disney, athleticism equals Nike). Some of these metaphorical transfers may be unanticipated by managers and are therefore decidedly unwelcome (McDonald's is arteriosclerosis, Microsoft is megalomaniacal, Burberry is chavesque).<sup>3</sup> But such figurative imputations are the coin of the marketing realm.

Demeaning meanings aside, the apogee of metaphorization is the theme park and its manifold "experiential" offshoots (Pine and Gilmore 1999; Schmitt 2003; Shaw and Ivens 2005). Walt Disney World is an anthropomorphised

<sup>2</sup> Metaphor manufacture and mongering is the key to a career as a marketing guru, moreover. Brand DNA, emotional branding and the so-called brand gym are attracting enthusiastic attention as I write and no doubt brand diets, muscle-bound brands, brand obesity, brand Botox, brand cellulite and the like are looming on the marketing horizon.

<sup>3</sup> The technical term for this is hypostasis. The study of metaphor is full of technical terms and hair-splitting distinctions between figures of speech (Kövecses 2002). For most practical purposes, the crucial distinctions are between metaphor (where one thing is described as another), simile (where one thing is "like" something else) and metonymy (where the part stands for the whole).

amusement arcade-cum-attraction, complete with Mickey, Minnie and their creepily cheery minions. Rainforest Café is a kitsch recreation of a critter-infested jungle, albeit with elephant fries, gorilla shakes and fearsome leeches that feed on parents' pocketbooks. The Burning Man Festival is an outdoor theme park for Silicon Valley dataraptors, who desire to demonstrate during a few days of dystopian deprivation that money isn't everything, bonfires are cool and buck naked is the way to be (Kozinets 2002). Las Vegas, likewise, is a metropolis of metaphorical metropolises – New York, Paris, Venice, Monte Carlo, Mandalay – as well as Ancient Egypt, Ancient Rome and King Arthur's Ancient Britain (Belk 2000). The only place that's missing is a miniature version of Las Vegas itself (featuring rat packs, wedding chapels, ersatz Elvises and violin case-carrying mobsters).<sup>4</sup>

*Capisce?*

### Metaphors maketh management

Most would concede that marketing is a rich brew/stew/bouillabaisse of eye-catching analogies. But is this a good thing? Fifty years ago, the answer was clear. Certainly not! Way back then, when metonymical reds were under the bed and the unadorned International Style of modern architecture held sway, metaphors were widely regarded as a *very bad thing* (Ortony 1993). Strunk and White (1959), the prim protectors of proper literature, warned against extravagant language in general and exuberant metaphors in particular (see also Orwell 1962). Metaphors were considered unnecessary, unseemly, unfit for purpose. Mixed metaphors, if not quite a sign of ill-breeding – nay, depravity – were a serious syntactical faux pas. Plain prose, simply put, was the order of the day, especially in an academic discipline that aspired to respectable scientific status in the soul-searching aftermath of the Ford and Carnegie reports (Brown 1995).

Come the freewheeling 1980s, however, when it was morning in America and clichés were king, figures of speech came out of the closet. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) led the way, by demonstrating the pervasiveness of metaphorical reasoning and contending that humankind's understanding of the world was metaphor mediated. Even the most common or garden variety prose, they showed, was blooming with efflorescent analogies. It is surely no accident that the 1980s also witnessed the emergence of trope-engorged business blockbusters, principally Peters and Waterman's mega-selling *In Search of Excellence*, which was predicated on the archetypal journey or quest metaphor that underpins everything from Homer's *Odyssey* and *The Pilgrim's Progress* to *On the Road* and *Dude, Where's My Car?*.

In the quarter century since Peters and Waterman's triumph, metaphors have gone from strength to strength. They have been enthusiastically embraced by every imaginable academic discipline (see Knowles and Moon

<sup>4</sup> It is arguable that with their swish buildings, airy atriums, five-star accommodation and not-to-be-sneezed-at networking opportunities, business schools are pedagogic theme parks for alpha executives (those who have no time for holidays and a work ethic that puts Max Weber to shame).

2006), albeit business and management seems particularly partial to inventive analogies. Management speak, to cite the most obvious example, is an exceptionally rich mulch of metaphors – pushing the envelope up the flagpole of out of the box thinking to the next level of the learning curve, et cetera – though this figurative midden is too much for many purple-faced defenders of proper English (e.g. Humphrys 2005), who regard the management lexicon as the compost of conversation, the dung of discourse, the guano of language...

Ordure or otherwise, it can't be denied that contemporary management is metaphor minded. As a glance at the business bestseller list clearly indicates, anthropomorphism is today's favourite figurative device. Purple cows, black swans, inquisitive squirrels, dancing elephants, cubicle monkeys, disenchanting mice, canny rats, lunatic lemmings, silverback CEOs, hares and tortoises, hedgehogs and foxes, and strangely disembodied long tails are running wild on the corporate Serengeti, where the consultancy waterholes are overflowing and the retainer fee forage is inexhaustible (Patterson and Brown 2006). The seas – sorry, the blue oceans – are similarly filled with fishing similes, albeit the octopus has had a bad rap ever since Standard Oil was thus described in 1904. Scorpion strategies and dung beetle business plans are also few in number, though it's only a matter of time, surely, before elephant seals are hailed as the bees' knees. No doubt the parable of the blind men is being reworked as I write and relocated, presumably, on a rapidly melting icecap.

Weird as it is, this metaphorical menagerie is only part of the analogical array assaulting today's sales and marketing managers. When we add in the militaristic metaphors (Sun-Tzu, Genghis Khan), the sporting metaphors (cricket, judo, et al), the musical metaphors (orchestras, jazz bands), the geological metaphors (crossing chasms, "quakes" of all kinds) the meteorological metaphors (perfect storms, winds of change), the temporal metaphors (built to last, the "end" of whatever) and the aforementioned travelling metaphors (good to great, in search of inspiration), it's clear that we're a very long way from Strunk and White.<sup>5</sup> So far, in fact, that a three stage model of metaphor development can be tentatively posited: (1) an *ornamental* era, when figures of speech were considered vulgar add-ons; (2), an *elemental* era, when the realization dawned that figurative thinking was not only unavoidable but invaluable; and (3) a *detrimental* era, where anthropomorphic tropes have become so commonplace they're tantamount to vermin. The next stage, inevitably, will involve interbreeding, memetic modification and a master-race of mutant monstrosities that feed on the cash cows and greedy pigs of capitalism. A cull is called for. Extermination is the only answer. Action must be taken against the rapidly-breeding rabbits of corporate life!

<sup>5</sup> Even mixed metaphors are acceptable nowadays. The problem, according to leading literary critic James Wood (2008, p. 155), does not lie with mixed metaphors – which may prove stunningly inventive – but with mixed clichés (as, for example, "out of a sea of despair he has pulled forth a plumb").

### Mixed metaphormatosis

Okay, perhaps bunny-cide is a bit extreme. US coffee bars, though, might argue that that is exactly what's needed with Starbucks. Released into the American wild by Howard Schultz, after a caffeine-scouting safari to Italy, the wanton Starbucks strain spread rapidly and displaced defenceless indigenous species (Simmons 2004). Considered cute and cuddly by customers, the Starbucks creature was unstoppable. The brand ran amok. Every nook and cranny of the variegated retail ecology was occupied by a benevolently belligerent Starbucks. The third place rapidly became every third place, even in Italy, the natural habitat of Howard Schultz's omnipresent omnivores. It was only when the entire world was colonised, overpopulation prevailed and the quality of the breeding stock started to deteriorate that the Starbucks category killers started their retreat, much like the McDonald's cane toads, KFC killer bees and Coca-Cola kudzu grass before them.

As this unnatural history of Starbucks demonstrates, metaphors can distort, deceive and disorientate. Sometimes they're downright dangerous (Lewontin 1993; Sontag 1991). The tumbling of Wall Street in the aftermath of the Northern Rock landslide, and Bear Stearns' subsequent dance macabre, is at least partly attributable to the emotive metaphors and idiomatic expressions that were bandied around as events unfolded. "Meltdown", "1929", "panic" and "crash" are the financial equivalent of shouting "fire" in a crowded theatre or "shark" on a summertime beach.

Similarly, the ongoing sorrows of the downloads-devastated music industry are not unrelated to the collapse of the master-slave metaphor that conventionally obtained – the suits at the record labels, the T-shirts in the studio (Kelley 2007) – and the industry's abject inability to articulate an alternative analogical framework. Only "network" comes close, though the associated connotations of malevolent, money-grubbing tarantulas in the centre of a musical web aren't exactly endearing either.

Be that as it may, the most dangerous metaphors of all are those whose metaphorical status have either been forgotten or are not immediately apparent. As Bennis and O'Toole (2005) convincingly argue, the metaphor that management is science – rather than, say, a craft, calling or community service – is having a deleterious impact on the character, curriculum and recruitment policies of leading business schools. Many faculty, they contend, are so committed to the scientific conceit, with its attendant connotations of rigour and quantification and experimentation and theories of everything, that they have lost sight of the human all-too-human realities of day-to-day management.<sup>6</sup> "Today," they ruefully observe, "it is possible to find tenured

<sup>6</sup> Marketing scholarship, similarly, is communicated in a scientific manner – dry prose, passive voice, styleless style – which further alienates practising managers, many of whom don't subscribe to the marketing is science metaphor. They adhere, rather, to a technology trope, a toolkit analogy, a widget worldview, if you will. Forced to choose between rigorous, carefully qualified articles in impenetrable journals and the sparkling, if superficial, similes sold by fast-talking management consultants, who can blame managers for choosing saccharine over science? In many ways, marketing managers and marketing academics live in different metaphorical worlds.

*professors of management who have never set foot inside a real business, except as customers*" (Bennis and O'Toole 2005, p. 100).

At the opposite extreme, consider the portrayal of business life in the media generally and on reality television shows in particular. Systematic studies have consistently shown that literary, cinematic and televisual portrayals of sales and business people are unerringly negative and the venality, backstabbing and unethical antics on parade in shows like *The Apprentice* serve to further reinforce the malevolent stereotype (Pollard 2000). Although it is easy to dismiss such representations as unrealistic or inaccurate or simply a branch of dumbed-down showbiz, the problem is that they function in a metonymical fashion (where the part stands for the whole). The behaviour exhibited by Tony Soprano or the Trump tykes or the *Dragons' Den* denizens is projected on to the entire business community, as are the fraudulent activities of MBA-credentialed malefactors like Jeffrey Skilling or Andrew Fastow (Khurana 2007). The few bad apples defence doesn't work, because all the apples in the metaphorical barrel are considered much of a muchness.

Being tarred with the bad apples brush isn't exactly a barrel of laughs. And throwing off the shackles of marketing science is easier said than done. The hardest thing of all, however, is extirpating tropes that are so ideologically engrained as to appear commonsensical, unchallengeable, natural. Customer is king is a classic example. Every manager worth his or her salt subscribes to the customer is king conceit. It is expounded in every single executive education course and marketing degree programme. Rigorous management scientists and slippery snake oil sellers alike adhere to the idea of the sovereign consumer. It is inarguably the core metaphor of marketing management (Dixon 2008).

A moment's reflection on this monarchical metaphor reveals its insidious side. It implies that marketers are subservient, that consumers are omniscient, that bowing and scraping and prostration and genuflection and worshipful adoration before his highness king customer are right and proper, the done thing, the way of the world. Yet the empirical evidence clearly shows that consumers are not omniscient, that they are prone to errors of judgement, that they are often completely wrong headed, that their hidebound views can seriously inhibit innovation and, not least, that consumers' awareness of their elevated position is giving them delusions of grandeur (Brown 2004; Christensen 1997; Franklin 2003). Now, this does not mean that marketing's emperor metaphor has no clothes. Nor does it mean that sovereign consumers must be dethroned forthwith. Nor, for that matter, does it mean that customers are somehow irrelevant or unnecessary or can be safely ignored. Every business depends on customers, end of story. It simply means that obsequious deference to king customer's every whim is injudicious at best and injurious at worst. An alternative metaphor of marketer-consumer co-dependency is called for (Table 1).

**Table 1 The Elephant Manager**

If the regal consumer occupies one end of the figurative spectrum, consumer subjection represents the other. Practised by the likes of Steve Jobs, Donald Trump, Madonna and Michael O'Leary (not forgetting monopolistic utility companies) this involves disrespecting customers at best and disdaining them at worst. They are treated mean to keep them keen.

In between these two extremes, several alternative positions can be identified, most notably "relationship marketing" and "customer co-creation". Relationship marketing's marriage metaphor, as Tynan (1997) convincingly argues, is conceptually questionable and, although it is attracting much excited discussion at present, customer co-creation is no less imperfect. The notion that consumers happily toil on behalf of big brand names – like unpaid elves in Santa's grotto – is managerially appealing. But cracks start to appear when the elves get uppity and start to think they own the place, the product, the brand. Just ask over-enthusiastic Harry Potter fans, who have been sued by J.K. Rowling and Warner Brothers for breach of copyright. Co-creation, one suspects, is a misnomer akin to "friendly fire". Cyber slave labour is closer. The workers of the wiki-world remain enchained, in thrall to False Consciousness 2.0.

Clearly, a radical remetaphorisation of the consumer-marketer dyad is required. To this end, it might be helpful if we recognise that consumers and marketers are different species. They are species that share many characteristics and occupy the same brandscape, but remain very different all the same. Consumers, in certain respects, are best envisaged as elephants – elephants in Armani, elephants on Viagra, elephants with iPods, elephants driving Jaguars, elephants watching *Dumbo* on DVD, elephants posting profiles on Facebook and Hot or Not, albeit with difficulty because of their keyboard fingering failings.

These pachyderm parallels are less ludicrous than many might imagine, moreover (Bloom 2006; Delort 1992; Meredith 2001). Like consumers, elephants are highly intelligent with remarkable memories for the slightest slight. Like consumers, elephants live in compact family groups and extended tribes or herds. Like consumers, elephants are inveterate communicators with a wide range of vocalised expressions and an astonishing repertoire of body language. Like consumers, elephants are playful, hard working, deeply emotional creatures, delight and grief included. Like consumers, elephants are omnivorous, prone to gluttony and partial to alcoholic beverages, Guinness especially. Like consumers, elephants set great store by their appearance. Baths, showers, mudpacks and coatings of cosmetic dust are commonplace. Like consumers, elephants are imitative herd animals, that are easily spooked, liable to stampede and ever ready to run amok. Like consumers, elephants can be temperamental, revengeful and environmentally irresponsible – vandalistic, in fact – when anything gets in their way or impedes their progress. Like consumers, elephants have been ruthlessly exploited by poachers, ivory traders and other market-driven miscreants, many of whom claim to worship these endlessly fascinating animals. What price mahout marketing?

### Rooting for tropes

If the bad news is that root metaphors are difficult to root out, the good news is that management metaphors have a life cycle just like products, brands and organisations. A figure of speech that starts off *striking* soon becomes *standard*, then increasingly *stale* and, in the fullness of time, a *stiff* or dead metaphor. Breaking out of the box is a case in point. Once illuminating, latterly lambasted, it is now in the box – the coffin – of discourse. Pushing



the envelope is pushing up daisies. Running things up the flagpole is flying at half mast. The tipping point has reached its tripping point. Shoot the puppy has not only been put down but it is decomposing alongside the dead whale that is being kicked up the beach by an 800lb gorilla that's just jumped the shark.

Closer to home, the 4Ps construct is increasingly a figure of ridicule, a metonymy for unimaginative marketing thinking. As Blythe (2006, p. 62) wryly observes about the conceptual equivalent of chicken nuggets, what he terms "airport bookshop" marketing:

*For a while in the 1990s there was a fashion for adding more Ps as the shortcomings of the model became clearer. A lot of marketing journals in the 1990s have papers entitled 'Pork chops – the fifth P of marketing?', or something similar, but the vast majority of marketing textbooks follow the four P approach.*

Parody Ps notwithstanding, the lifecycle of marketing management metaphors is enormously variable. Some are like fireflies, a brief burst of illumination on a sultry summer's night (those that announce "revolutions" or "crises" are inherently short lived), others are akin to cicadas, chirping incessantly at the edge of corporate consciousness (those that extol the "simply better" benefits of "built to last" consistency, for instance). Yet others are veritable home runs on their home turf only to strike out ignominiously in less congenial cultural contexts (e.g. baseball metaphors outside America and Japan). Timing is an important consideration too, because there is a tide in the affairs of metaphor which taken at the flood leads to the Fortune 500 (business as war analogies have surrendered in the aftermath of Iraq, whereas going green is the new red, white and blue).

Despite the enormous variation in life expectancy, the very best metaphors appear to have a lifespan of around ten years or so. *In Search of Excellence* and *Good to Great* are fairly typical in this regard. Not only are they predicated on the archetypal quest metaphor, but the primary vehicle is composed of subordinate conceits. The chapter titles of *In Search of Excellence* include Stick to the Knitting, Close to the Customer and Hands-on, Value-driven. *Good to Great* is made up of The Hedgehog Concept, Level Five Leadership and The Flywheel and the Doom Loop, among others. Business bestsellers, it seems, are a bit like Russian dolls, with figures within figures of speech. It remains to be seen whether *Good to Great* will last as long as its excellent predecessor, but the same heady mix of trope-inflated contents suggests that, if and when it flags in due course, it won't be for lack of metaphorical heft (Rosenzweig 2007).

Longevity is one thing, of course, lifestyle is something else again, insofar as the metaphorical persona that characterised an organisation or brand or institution in its salad days may alter considerably as its waistline thickens and middle aged spread sets in. Enron evolved from the smartest guys in the room to the biggest crooks on the planet. Ryanair switched from an endearingly pugilistic upstart to a big belligerent bully who pummelled all who stood in its path. Wal-Mart mutated from an affable southern gentleman, who greeted everyone on entry, to a descendent of Dr Evil intent on total global domination. Sony slipped from a sagacious eastern guru, intuitively in tune with the needs of the market, to a forgetful senior citizen who sets laptops

on fire and fails to deliver Playstations on schedule. The business school, as Khurana (2007) shows in his critical history of the institution, commenced as a knight in shining armour, determined to raise the standing of dubious social activities, only to turn into a Mephistophelean schemer, who induces MBAs to sell their souls for the devil called share options.<sup>7</sup>

Root metaphors can evolve too, albeit they do so rhizomatically. The customer is king construct, for example, has shifted from the absolutism of the days when organisations bowed and scraped before consumers' divine right to an egalitarian position where ongoing "relationships" are predicated on familial bonds (O'Malley, Patterson and Kelly-Holmes 2008). The only problem with this alleged egalitarianism is that there is a world of difference between family relationships and business relationships. When CRM-committed organisations break their social contract, as many "friendly" financial institutions tend to do when credit gets tight, they are loathed even more fiercely than when formal, impersonal, business-like arrangements prevail. Consumers accept that business is business but when blood-brother bonds are betrayed it's blood on the carpet time. As Ariely (2008, p. 79) cogently notes:

*You can't treat your customers like family one moment and then treat them impersonally – or, even worse, as a nuisance or a competitor – a moment later when this becomes more convenient or profitable...No matter how many cookies, slogans, and tokens of friendship a bank provides, one violation of the social exchange means...consumers will take personal offense. They'll leave the bank angry and spend hours complaining to their friends about this awful bank. After all, this was a relationship framed as a social exchange.*

## Metaphor wars

Change, then, comes with the metaphorical territory. But what are the mechanisms of metaphorical change? Are metaphors Malthusian, whereby they increase exponentially while demand increases arithmetically and the upshot of the figurative imbalance is war, famine, disease, death? Are metaphors Veblenian, the corporate equivalent of conspicuous consumption, Tiffanyesque trinkets that are acquired as a signifier of success, only to be cast aside as they trickle down to the hoi polloi? Are metaphors Marxian, fluffy-bunny forms of false consciousness, the figurative face of exploitation, despoliation, overconsumption, symbols of the internal contradictions of collapsing hypercapitalism? Are metaphors Porterian, a competitive arena where the five forces of substitutes, suppliers, rivals, new entrants and

<sup>7</sup> Many more examples could be cited: Nike began as a dedicated athlete who played for the love of the sport but was so determined to win that it was accused of dabbling in dubious sweatshop practices; Google set out with the intention of "doing no harm" but ended up as a cybercensor for the People's Republic of China; marketing's aspirations to customer "satisfaction" have been inflated to "delight", "rapture", "ecstasy", etc. Can the consumer orgasmatron be far away?

buyer power prevail, where the value chain metaphor captures the value of metaphors and where low cost tropes co-exist with differentiated expressions and focussed figures of speech?

A compelling case, no doubt, can be made for any or all of the above. However, the most plausible mechanism – or, rather, the mechanism that most marketers might subscribe to – is Darwinian. The fittest metaphors survive. Those that are best adapted to the managerial environment are selected and reproduce in corner offices worldwide. Those that aren't adaptive die early and unloved. Many similes survive in specialist niches (dogs and cows in the Boston box), some are stranded when the environment changes (the business is war trope in the aftermath of Iraq), others are able to adjust thanks to a lucky mutation (long an unpretentious paragon of purity, Dove soap is thriving as an unadulterated ambassador for "real" beauty). But all battle it out in a winnowing world of tooth and nail competition where tropes are red in tooth and claw. The ascent of management demands nothing less.

If metaphors are Darwinian and anthropomorphism in all its furry, finny, flighty forms is the single most popular management conceit, there remains a final fascinating question. Symbolically speaking, what kind of animals are metaphors? Are metaphors the peacocks of prose, creatures that help organisations and brands shimmer and strut? Are metaphors domesticated herd animals, the cows and sheep of discourse that we greedily devour day and daily? Are they linguistic pets like parakeets or poodles who tell us what we want to hear and wag their tails in welcome? Are they savage mastiffs that bite the hand that feeds them or slinky mountain lions that pounce when least expected? Are they the pests portrayed earlier – rabbits, locusts, mosquitoes, slugs et al – or, come to think of it, linguistic bacteria that live in the roiling gut of ulcerated organisations?

The B-school-based biologists of business life are divided on these issues. Speaking personally, I believe that metaphors are serpents. Yes, serpents. They are seductive, they are seditious, they are smart, they are satanic, they are slippery, slithery, slinky, scary.<sup>8</sup> They shed their skin, they speak with forked tongue, they are worshipped by some and detested by others, they reside in the tree of management knowledge, they are the worm in the Apple...

...which is where we came in.

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<sup>8</sup> Serpents are one of the oldest and most revered/feared human symbols (Becker 1994). In addition to the Garden of Eden story, they are important in innumerable cultures, ranging from ancient Egypt (the cobra goddess) and central America (the feathered serpent) to their manifestations in Indian and Norse mythology (Kundalini and Midgard serpents, respectively). For a detailed discussion of serpent symbolism, see Narby (1998).

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