Marketing Without Mission: The Secularization of Marketing Practice

By
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Abstract

Marketing communication practice can become detached from ethical and transcendent purpose (the secularization of marketing practice) because of structural pressures associated with performance metrics, organizational design, speed, and platform incentives that narrow moral salience in marketing decision-making. Drawing on consumer culture theory, symbolic interactionism, marketing ethics, market orientation, and Business as Mission (BAM) scholarship, we find that these structural pressures do not make secularized outcomes inevitable. They can be interrupted by customer orientation, mutually beneficial exchange, professional ethics, stakeholder commitments, and practitioner agency. In particular, reframing marketing through the lens of BAM offers a stewardship-based approach for evaluating marketing decisions, with implications for future research on safeguarding ethical visibility and practical guidance for BAM leaders and Christian professionals working in non-BAM organizations.

Introduction

Marketing encompasses the creation, communication, delivery, and exchange of offerings that provide value to customers and society. This paper focuses on marketing communication—particularly messaging, branding, advertising, social media, and related influence activities. These activities can shape how individuals interpret value, construct identity, and make decisions within contemporary society. Through messaging, branding, and communication strategies, marketing communication does not merely present products; it may also participate in constructing meaning and cultural significance. This meaning-making role is especially evident for identity-relevant and hedonic products, such as clothing, automobiles, smartphones, beauty products, travel, and entertainment. It may be less central for routine utilitarian purchases such as paper towels, produce, or dental floss, although even these products can sometimes communicate meanings related to care, thrift, health, or sustainability. Marketing is therefore one contributor to meaning-making rather than the sole social institution through which meaning is created.[1]

This paper argues that moral neutrality can be misleading when marketing communication has foreseeable implications for truth, dignity, privacy, autonomy, or human well-being. It does not argue that marketing was once sacred and has recently become secular, that most commercial transactions are unethical, or that ethical responsibility and business performance are mutually exclusive. Rather, marketing—particularly within agency, corporate, and platform environments—may become functionally secular when decision processes bracket moral and spiritual considerations even though those considerations are relevant. This condition is conceptualized here as the secularization of marketing practice: the functional detachment of marketing decision-making from ethical and transcendent purpose under particular organizational conditions. These outcomes are not always the result of explicit intent; however, structural incentives do not eliminate practitioner choice or responsibility.[2]

The purpose of this paper is threefold. First, it introduces and defines the construct of the secularization of marketing practice as a conditional decision-making state rather than a historical transition or a claim that all marketing is morally deficient. Second, it develops a conceptual framework explaining how structural forces within marketing environments may produce functionally secular decision-making and how ethical leadership, market orientation, professional standards, and individual agency may interrupt that pathway. Third, it reframes marketing as a form of calling aligned with the principles of Business as Mission (BAM), emphasizing stewardship, responsibility, and the ethical implications of influence. The paper is written primarily for leaders and practitioners in BAM enterprises, while also offering practical implications for Christian marketers working in publicly held, secular, or religiously plural organizations.[3]

Marketing as Meaning-Making: Theoretical and Biblical Foundations

Marketing as a System of Meaning Construction

Marketing communication can extend beyond the functional communication of product attributes. Its influence varies by product category and consumption context. Consumer culture theory (CCT) emphasizes that consumption may be embedded within systems of symbols and narratives through which individuals construct and express identity. This role is especially visible for products that are public, experiential, hedonic, or identity-relevant. Belk argues that possessions can contribute to the "extended self," while McCracken describes how cultural meaning may be transferred to consumer goods through advertising and consumption practices. Routine utilitarian products generally carry less symbolic weight, although marketing may still associate them with meanings such as cleanliness, health, responsibility, economy, or environmental concern.

Taken together, these perspectives position marketing communication as one possible contributor to meaning-making rather than as a universally symbolic or purely informational function.[4]

Symbolic Interactionism and Interpretive Processes

The meaning-making role of marketing can be further understood through symbolic interactionism, which emphasizes that meaning is constructed through social interaction and interpretation. Marketing is not unique in this respect; family communication, religious discourse, accounting practices, education, and other social activities are also interpreted through cultural lenses. Marketing communications nevertheless function as symbolic inputs within this broader interpretive environment. Cultural relevance should not be confused with moral relativism or moral detachment. Meaning-making itself is neither inherently moral nor immoral. It becomes ethically significant when communication affects truthfulness, dignity, fairness, vulnerability, autonomy, or foreseeable harm. Thus, the concern is not that marketing supplies symbolic cues, but how those cues are used and evaluated.[5]

Biblical Foundations: Communication, Truth, and Stewardship

The recognition that marketing shapes meaning aligns with biblical perspectives on communication, truth, and human responsibility. The Creation Mandate in Genesis 1 establishes humanity as stewards of creation, tasked with cultivating and ordering the world (Genesis 1:28). This responsibility includes naming and categorizing, which are fundamentally acts of meaning-making. From this perspective, communication is not merely functional—it is formative. Words shape understanding, and understanding shapes action. This principle is reinforced throughout Scripture, particularly in teachings related to truth and representation. Proverbs emphasizes the importance of honesty in both commerce and communication: "The Lord detests dishonest scales, but accurate weights find favor with him" (Proverbs 11:1). While the immediate context concerns trade, the broader implication extends to how value is represented. Similarly, Proverbs 12:22 states, "The Lord detests lying lips, but he delights in people who are trustworthy." Communication is therefore tied to moral character. Misrepresentation—whether explicit or implicit—undermines trust and violates principles of integrity. In the New Testament, the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18–20) underscores the transformative power of communication. While the focus is on spiritual teaching, the broader implication is that communication shapes belief and behavior. Marketing, as a structured form of communication, operates within this same dynamic.[6]

Implications: Marketing as a Non-Neutral Practice

Integrating these perspectives leads to a qualified conclusion: marketing communication is not always morally neutral when it shapes perception, identity, or behavior in ways that bear on truth, dignity, autonomy, or well-being. This does not imply that organizational performance and ethical responsibility are incompatible. Firms can—and many do—pursue customer value, financial success, and moral responsibility simultaneously. Nor does every routine transaction require extensive moral analysis. The concern is that organizational systems may prioritize measurable outcomes so strongly that ethically relevant considerations receive insufficient attention when they do arise. This possibility creates the conditions for what this paper identifies as the secularization of marketing practice. Meaning-making is not inherently immoral; rather, it establishes why some communication decisions can carry moral significance.[7]

The Secularization of Marketing Practice

Despite marketing communication's interpretive and meaning-shaping role, some contemporary practices may reflect a detachment from ethical and transcendent considerations. This paper conceptualizes this condition as the secularization of marketing practice, defined as the functional prioritization of performance-based outcomes over moral, ethical, and purpose-driven considerations when those considerations are relevant to marketing decision-making. The term does not imply that marketing was previously sacred or religious and then became secular. It adapts a broader understanding of secularization as the bracketing of transcendent commitments from institutional decision processes. Secularization in this context also does not imply the explicit rejection of moral values. Marketing practitioners may retain personal ethical beliefs while working in systems that direct attention primarily toward engagement, conversion, growth, legality, and client expectations.[8]

This condition can be further understood as functional secularity, in which a marketing decision is evaluated as though technical, legal, and performance criteria are sufficient even when morally relevant consequences are foreseeable. Influence itself is not inherently moral or immoral; it can inform, persuade, serve, manipulate, or remain morally insignificant depending on its purpose and effects. Likewise, a functionally secular outcome is not automatically an immoral outcome. The concern arises when moral questions are excluded from consideration in circumstances involving deception, exploitation, privacy, autonomy, discriminatory targeting, or harm to vulnerable audiences. Marketing theory has long emphasized performance, efficiency, and responsiveness to market conditions. These emphases have strengthened value creation and responsiveness to consumer needs. They become problematic only when treated as complete substitutes for ethical judgment.[9]

This possibility creates a structural tension within marketing practice. On one hand, marketing is a powerful tool for informing consumers, creating value, and sustaining firms, employment, and exchange. On the other hand, some systems prioritize efficiency and measurable impact without a corresponding process for identifying ethically relevant consequences. Harmful campaigns and exploitative targeting should not be treated as the norm; they are examples of risks that can arise in particular contexts. Consumer satisfaction with most exchanges is important evidence of value, but satisfaction may not reveal hidden data practices, opaque targeting, addictive design, or other effects consumers cannot readily observe.[10]

From a conceptual standpoint, the secularization of marketing practice is best understood as a possible reorientation of decision criteria rather than an inevitable transformation of the discipline. Marketing may shift from communicating value within an explicit ethical framework toward optimizing influence within a performance-driven system, but this pathway can be interrupted by market orientation, mutually beneficial exchange, professional ethics, stakeholder governance, organizational values, and practitioner agency. Addressing the condition therefore requires attention to both structural mechanisms and the individuals and institutions capable of resisting them.[11]

Structural Drivers of Secularized Marketing Practice

The secularization of marketing practice cannot be attributed solely to individual choices, but neither is it structurally inevitable. This section develops a mechanism-based explanation of how specific structural forces may shape decision-making processes and increase the likelihood of functionally secular outcomes. The revised pathway is conditional: Structural Forces → Narrowed Cognitive Framing → Reduced Moral

Salience → Possible Secularized Marketing Practice. Ethical leadership, professional standards, market orientation, organizational safeguards, and individual agency may interrupt this pathway.[12]

Metric Dominance and the Narrowing of Evaluation

One potential driver of secularization is the dominance of performance metrics in marketing decision-making. Contemporary marketing systems rely heavily on quantifiable indicators such as click-through rates, conversion rates, cost per acquisition, and return on ad spend. These metrics provide clarity, comparability, accountability, and the revenue needed to sustain firms and employment. Ineffective marketing may waste scarce resources. The concern is therefore not measurement or performance itself, but metric exclusivity. When measurable outcomes become the sole definition of success, dimensions such as truthfulness, dignity, and long-term trust may be overlooked. As in sports, quantitative competition and moral conduct can coexist; the score matters, but so do the rules and standards governing how the game is played.[13]

The Client-Service Model and Diffusion of Responsibility

A second potential structural driver is the client-service model that characterizes many agency environments. Responsibility for outcomes may be distributed across clients, agencies, platforms, vendors, and creators. This diffusion of responsibility can produce moral distancing and is consistent with broader research on bystander inaction and reduced personal accountability when responsibility is shared. The mechanism is not unique to marketing; similar pressures can occur in accounting, finance, management, and other organizational functions. Marketing communication is the focus here because its outputs directly shape public representation and consumer influence. Shared responsibility does not eliminate individual accountability, but it may make ethical ownership less salient.[14]

Speed, Optimization, and the Compression of Reflection

Modern marketing operates within increasingly accelerated cycles of planning, execution, and optimization. Real-time analytics, automated bidding systems, continuous content production, and artificial intelligence can increase responsiveness, efficiency, and relevance. They may also compress the time available for reflection and introduce concerns involving privacy, bias, synthetic or misleading content, opacity, and reduced human oversight. Time pressure does not necessarily produce unethical conduct, but it can make pre-established ethical review practices more important. Ethical considerations need not dominate every routine adjustment; rather, organizations should create proportionate checkpoints for decisions with foreseeable moral implications.[15]

Platform Algorithms and Incentive Structures

A fourth structural driver is the role of platform algorithms in shaping marketing behavior. Digital platforms use algorithmic systems to curate content and maximize engagement, often rewarding emotionally charged, novel, or controversial material. These incentives can encourage sensationalism, exaggeration, addictive design, or manipulation, but marketers are not uniformly beholden to the systems. Some knowingly endorse harmful practices, others object, and still others build safeguards or refuse particular tactics. Platform structures constrain and reward behavior; they do not eliminate agency or responsibility. Artificial intelligence further intensifies this tension by enabling personalization and rapid content creation while raising questions about privacy, transparency, bias, authenticity, and human oversight.[16]

Taken together, these structural drivers may produce a pattern in which metrics narrow evaluation, organizational structures diffuse responsibility, speed reduces opportunities for reflection, and platforms reward attention. These forces do not determine marketer behavior, nor do they make all resulting outcomes immoral. Rather, they can create a cognitive environment in which ethically relevant considerations are less visible. The resulting risk is a technically sophisticated but morally attenuated system of influence. Ethical leadership, market orientation, professional standards, stakeholder commitments, and individual judgment remain important counterforces.[17]

Ethical and Strategic Implications of Secularized Marketing Practice

The secularization of marketing practice has implications that extend beyond individual campaigns or firm-level outcomes, but those implications should be understood alongside the discipline's ethical countertraditions. Marketing orientation, mutually beneficial exchange, corporate social responsibility, the triple bottom line, conscious capitalism, benefit corporations, organizational values statements, and professional ethics codes demonstrate that many firms intentionally integrate business performance and moral responsibility. Mindful Marketing similarly evaluates marketing through both marketplace effectiveness and societal impact. The argument advanced here is therefore not that marketing is uniformly secularized, but that secularizing pressures can coexist with—and be restrained by—these countervailing commitments.[18]

Marketing as a Non-Neutral System of Influence

When marketing communication shapes how consumers interpret value, identity, and choice, it may carry moral implications; however, influence itself can be beneficial, harmful, or morally indifferent. The relevant question is whether decision processes recognize ethical issues when they arise. Marketing systems can inform customers, facilitate mutually beneficial exchange, and create substantial social and economic value. In particular cases, however, technically effective practices may also contribute to misrepresentation, manipulation, loss of privacy, or erosion of trust. This conditional framing aligns capability with accountability without presuming that most marketing exchanges are unethical.[19]

Short-Term Performance Versus Long-Term Value Creation

A second implication concerns the relationship between short-term performance and long-term value creation. These objectives are not inherently opposed. Many market-oriented firms recognize that customer trust, brand equity, and relational stability contribute to financial performance, and empirical marketing research has long connected customer orientation with organizational success. The risk arises when immediate metrics crowd out long-term consequences. Ethical integration should therefore be understood not as a rejection of effectiveness but as a means of protecting durable value.[20]

Influence, Responsibility, and Consumer Autonomy

The increasing sophistication of marketing technologies also raises questions about consumer autonomy. Advances in data analytics, personalization, and algorithmic targeting enable marketers to deliver highly tailored messages designed to influence specific individuals or segments. While these capabilities enhance relevance, they also create the potential for manipulation, particularly when consumers are unaware of how their data is being used. Within a secularized framework, these practices are often evaluated primarily in terms of effectiveness. However, from an ethical standpoint, they raise questions about the appropriate boundaries of influence. At what point does persuasion become manipulation? How should marketers balance effectiveness with respect for consumer agency? These questions highlight the need for a more integrated perspective in which marketing effectiveness is evaluated alongside ethical considerations. Without such integration, the discipline risks advancing techniques of influence without corresponding frameworks of responsibility.[21]

Strategic Implications for Firms

From a strategic perspective, secularizing pressures may create risks related to credibility, reputation, and long-term competitive advantage. Many firms already recognize these risks and operate accordingly. Firms that integrate ethical considerations, market orientation, and customer value into strategy may develop more sustainable forms of competitive advantage. Trust, authenticity, and transparency can function as strategic assets. The paper's contribution is therefore not the claim that firms have ignored long-term value, but the proposal that ethical reflection be made explicit within the structures through which marketing decisions are evaluated.[22]

Reframing Marketing Through Business as Mission (BAM)

Addressing secularizing pressures requires attention to the purpose, responsibilities, and decision systems of marketing communication. The Business as Mission (BAM) perspective provides a theological foundation for such reflection by integrating economic activity with ethical and spiritual purpose. This framework complements rather than replaces the marketing discipline's core commitments to customer value, mutually beneficial exchange, market orientation, and responsible practice.[23]

Marketing as Stewardship of Influence

Within a BAM framework, business activities are understood as forms of stewardship rather than purely profit-generating functions. Stewardship implies responsibility for the resources, relationships, and influence entrusted to individuals and organizations. Applied to marketing, this perspective suggests that influence itself is a resource that must be managed responsibly. Marketing does not merely allocate attention; it shapes perception, directs desire, and influences behavior. As such, it carries ethical and moral weight. This view is consistent with biblical teachings on stewardship and responsibility. In Genesis 1:28, humanity is entrusted with the task of cultivating and managing creation. This mandate implies both authority and accountability. Similarly, Luke 12:48 states, "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded." Applied to marketing, the capacity to influence others entails a corresponding obligation to act responsibly.[24]

Truth, Representation, and Integrity in Communication

A BAM-oriented approach to marketing also emphasizes the importance of truth and integrity in communication. As previously discussed, Proverbs 11:1 highlights the significance of honest representation: "The Lord detests dishonest scales, but accurate weights find favor with him." This principle extends beyond transactions to the communication of value itself. Marketing messages that exaggerate, distort, or misrepresent product attributes may be effective in the short term but conflict with principles of truthfulness. Similarly, strategies that rely on implicit manipulation or emotional exploitation raise questions about integrity. Ephesians 4:25 further reinforces this standard: "Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor." Within a marketing context, this suggests that communication should be evaluated not only in terms of effectiveness but also in terms of its alignment with truth.[25]

Human Dignity and Consumer Respect

Another central principle within BAM is the recognition of human dignity. Individuals are not merely targets or data points but persons created with inherent value (Genesis 1:27). This principle is consistent with marketing's core emphasis on mutually beneficial exchange and a market orientation that seeks to understand and serve customers. BAM adds an explicitly theological account of why consumers should be treated as ends rather than merely as means. From this perspective, marketing should aim to serve rather than manipulate consumers, while recognizing that persuasion and legitimate commercial effectiveness remain compatible with respect and responsibility.[26]

Calling, Vocation, and the Purpose of Marketing Work

Faith-and-work scholarship emphasizes that professional activities can be understood as forms of calling rather than merely economic functions. A calling-oriented perspective shifts the focus from what work produces to how it contributes to broader purposes. Applied to marketing, this perspective suggests that practitioners are not merely executing campaigns but participating in processes that shape meaning and influence behavior. As such, marketing work carries significance beyond immediate outcomes. Colossians 3:23 states, "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters." This passage underscores the idea that work should be approached with intentionality and integrity, regardless of context. For marketing practitioners, this implies that decisions should reflect not only organizational objectives but also ethical and moral considerations.[27]

Integrating Performance and Purpose

Reframing marketing through BAM does not require abandoning performance objectives. Rather, it involves integrating performance with purpose. Effectiveness remains important because firms must create value, earn revenue, sustain employment, and steward resources responsibly. Ethical reflection should be proportionate to the decision and especially visible when claims, targeting, data use, vulnerability, or foreseeable harm are involved. For Christian professionals in non-BAM organizations, practical actions may include questioning unsupported claims, advocating transparent disclosure, requesting human review of AI-generated content, proposing long-term trust measures, resisting manipulative design, documenting material concerns, and using appropriate escalation channels.[28]

Conclusion

Marketing communication can shape meaning, influence identity, and direct behavior within contemporary markets, particularly for hedonic and identity-relevant products. Yet this does not mean that all marketing is morally suspect, that secular outcomes are necessarily immoral, or that performance and purpose are mutually exclusive. This paper introduced the concept of the secularization of marketing practice to describe a conditional detachment of decision-making from ethical and transcendent considerations. Metric dominance, organizational design, speed, platform incentives, and artificial intelligence may reduce moral salience, but they do not determine behavior. Market orientation, mutually beneficial exchange, ethical codes, stakeholder commitments, organizational safeguards, and practitioner agency can interrupt the pathway. BAM provides a distinctive theological basis for stewardship, truth, dignity, and accountability while complementing existing ethical traditions within marketing. Future research should examine when secularizing pressures become consequential, which safeguards preserve ethical visibility, and how BAM and non-BAM practitioners can integrate effectiveness, customer value, and responsibility.[29]

About the Author

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