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Phenomenology in the Real World: From Default Thinking to Sensemaking

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BY Max Benavidez
PhD, Adjunct Prof., USC Annenberg, Assoc VP, CMC

Can you take the ideas of phenomenologists like Gadamer, Heidegger or Merleau-Ponty and apply them to the daily world of concrete business problems? Well, Christian Madsbjerg and Mikkel B. Rasmussen, two Danish strategy consultants, think you can. I first heard about them and their approach of transforming phenomenology into problem-solving when a colleague told me about their work and its sources. I was intrigued since philosophy was my undergraduate major at UCLA and I had long shared the belief, along with many others, that philosophy is the mother of all disciplines.

So, as a trained philosopher albeit as an undergraduate, the idea that you could take grand philosophical ideas and use them in everyday life appealed to me. I ordered Madsbjerg's and Rasmussen's book, *The Moment of Clarity: Using the Human Sciences to Solve Your Toughest Business Problems*. According to them, these sophisticated philosophical concepts, ideas and constructs can be applied to real-world situations especially in the consumer marketing realm.

At one point, they paraphrase Heidegger from his magnum opus, *Being and Time*: "we are at our best not when we are sitting, detached and thinking, but when we are deeply involved in the world -- when we forget where we are and engage in activities we can master." As they further note, he blurred the "distinctions between rational and irrational, subject and object." It comes down to what and how we experience things.

Another aspect of their approach to solving business problems is ethnographic anthropology. As they write: "Ethnography -- the process of observing, documenting and then analyzing behavior -- is one of the main data collection techniques for the human sciences." They also say that ethnography is an "imperative focus for analyzing phenomena." Again, I could relate as anthropology was a central part of my studies as a graduate student.

The anthropological process, they write, is contextual. As practicing ethnographers, they go into situations and use *thick description*, a concept from the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz, to find the texture that adds "depth to life" in the subject at hand, whether that is a Chinese consumer who wants to buy electronic equipment or why a child may prefer one play experience over another. In the end, it comes down to the way we experience within a cultural context. By taking the holistic nature of cultural context and its relationship to emotional resonance regarding

products and how and why we make decisions, Madsbjerg and Rasmussen developed what they call the *sensemaking* method, a new tool in the marketing research toolbox.

They also explain that sensemaking is complementary although quite different from what they refer to as *default* thinking. Default thinking is an automatic, taking-things-for-granted, unthinking use of the same tools and data to solving problems. It's helpful when dealing with efficiency and productivity but not so helpful when dealing with human behavior. In other words, the quant and qualitative approaches are complementary but when dealing with people, the qualitative approach is better at least according to Madsbjerg and Rasmussen.

They recommend we use both sensemaking and default thinking. In their words,

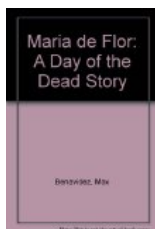
Certain problems benefit from a linear and rational approach, while other, less straightforward challenges -- navigating in a fog -- benefit from the problem solving utilized in the human sciences like philosophy, history, the arts and anthropology.

In other words, sensemaking helps us better understand how people really experience the world and life.

Madsbjerg and Rasmussen hope that readers' and clients' main takeaway is to get people right and that marketers, in particular, "reframe the problem as a phenomenon." I think that approach is worth pursuing whether in marketing or in life. The depth and richness of life is what it's all about and as they put it, we know about "love, trust, hatred and beauty through our experience of them in our everyday lives." And, that is truly extraordinary and simple.

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