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Article

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Editorial - The God of Consumerism moves East?

A theme pervading much of this edition is the new imperative in transforming eastern European enterprises towards customer responsiveness. In liberalised markets, privatised concerns are recognising the need to develop externally attuned mechanisms to measure their success in meeting the burgeoning demands of consumers. Behind this strategic shift lies the recognition, commonplace in the west, that the fate of the most Goliath of enterprises rests ultimately with the often unpredictable, yet unassailable, expression of taste by each intrepid buyer. Indeed the “sovereignty” of the consumer remains a tacit article of faith in Western societies at the end of the millennium. and the apparent “triumph” of capitalism suggest that the consumerist value system is set to gain global hegemony. The supermarket open twenty four hours a day is now no longer merely a metaphor for endless indulgence in choice and image readjustment on the part of bargain hunters. In eastern Europe, previous traditions of austerity have, at least at a symbolic level, given way to the imagery of mass consumption, poignantly depicted in the city of Chemnitz where the colossal statue of the head of Karl Marx now fronts a fast food restaurant.

In organisational terms, the gathering in pace of the consumer culture has led to a need to reappraise the dynamics of the producer/ consumer relationship. Undoubtedly, the advances made by the indignant and inscrutable citizen have been at the expense of the security and status of service providers in many sectors. So, for example, in the United Kingdom, which during the era of Thatcherism experienced a profound intensification of market orientated values, those in previously protected and quite prestigious occupations such as teaching and medicine discovered that *their* perceptions of quality service provision were now challengeable by recipients. Thus the certainties associated with professional status have given way to ambiguity resulting from the legitimisation of an alternative, and more commodity orientated view of the worth of jobs and services. The most direct effect of the new climate encapsulated in patients, citizens, students and parents’ charters has been the necessity for producers to compete in terms of speed and quality of service delivery in a context of job insecurity. Consequently, power has ebbed from the accountable provider to the empowered customer.

The status of the consumerism as a great orthodoxy of our times, which influences not only the process of market interaction, but also the identity and feeling of self worth of buyer and seller, means that its appeal invariably occurs at an ideological and rhetorical level. Thus, despite the aforementioned experiments in buyer power in the UK and other countries, one may question the extent to which there have been real revisions in structures of economic power and order. Resourcing limitations in education , the health service and local government have constrained attempts to upgrade service quality, whilst in the

private sector top level management have arguably been the primary beneficiaries of the deregulated economic climate. Thus, it seems, there is not an insignificant degree of “window dressing” inherent in the consumerist movement. As a credo for the late 1990’s, there may also be a tendency to apply the principles of consumerism on an undifferentiated basis. It would, at face value, appear absurd to compare the economic functions of, for example, a University and a fast food restaurant, and it would appear to be equally fatuous to equate the economic and social utility of an educational programme and a hamburger.

Nevertheless, at least at a rhetorical level in some educational circles there is a view that “those who buy the lunch will choose the menu”¹. What is surely needed at an organisation level is a more critical and discriminating approach to meeting customer needs, taking into account the nature of the product or service, its significance into the longer term, its moral as well as consumerist value, and any responsibilities of the buyer or recipient. In seeking to establish measures for product quality and consumer satisfaction in eastern Europe, it could be prudent to fine-tune these to the state of organisational (and national) evolution towards market orientation, as well as to the precise nature of the enterprise and its services.

Graham Hollinshead

¹ Oliver Fulton (1994): Consuming education. in Keat R., Whiteley N. and Abercrombie N.: The Authority of the Customer. Routledge, London and New York