# Calendars: Influential and widely used marketing planning tools

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## Abstract

*It may be that calendars are the most influential marketing planning tools in the world — indispensable and widely used by both buyers and marketing professionals. Therefore, it behoves marketers to understand the roles calendars play and the influence they exert in the marketplace. Such an understanding promises to enhance the calendrical timing and content of marketing practices, and sensitise marketers to the likelihood that some calendrical periods represent windows of marketing opportunity that are open much wider than those of other calendrical periods. Accordingly, this paper presents a summary and synthesis of insights gleaned from an exploratory inquiry that investigated the use and influence of calendars in the marketplace. First, the calendar-led nature of both buyers and marketers is articulated, followed by the identification and discussion of five interrelated principles that contribute to the marketplace influence of calendars, that is, the principles of (1) cyclicality, (2) cyclical inequality, (3) networked calendars, (4) cyclical conformity and (5) questionable causality. A discussion of marketing implications and recommendations follows. This is the first known inquiry to explore the potent influence that calendars exert in the marketplace.*

## Keywords

*calendars, calendar-led marketing, time, timing, calendrical planning, marketing principles*

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The implications for both marketing practice and marketing scholarship are staggering when considering that *calendars may be the most influential and widely used planning tools in the world*. Both buyers and marketers refer or defer to calendars frequently when planning day-to-day affairs, coordinating with others and timing a multitude of marketplace activities. Indeed, it is difficult to identify or imagine a household consumer, organisational buyer or marketing professional who is not calendar-led to some extent.

On the buyers' side, consumers are calendar-led when they synchronise their shopping excursions to coincide with their employer-designated paydays and with their favourite stores' trading hours. They may use their calendars to alert them to upcoming holidays, birthdays and other occasions that may prompt gift-giving, celebrations, travel, feasts and a flurry of other purchase and consumption behaviours. They may set aside designated periods on their calendars to watch television or listen to the radio, including the media's advertising messages. Before agreeing to meet with sales representatives, they are likely to consult their calendars to identify available and convenient time slots for such meetings. Similarly, organisational buyers are calendar-led when they time purchases to coincide with calendar-based monthly or annual budget allotments, favourable seasonal pricing, organisational needs that vary from one calendar period to another, and so on.

Likewise, brand managers and other marketing practitioners look to their calendars when coordinating marketing efforts with team members, planning the timing and content of marketing communications, staffing the sales floor or call centres, introducing new products and a host of other marketing-related activities.

Indeed, calendars play integral roles in shaping the temporal rhythm of the world's affairs, including those of the marketplace. One survey of more than 1,000 American households implied that most people would be lost in time without calendars. The study found that only 2 per cent of the respondents claimed not to refer to a calendar at least once a day (most reported referring to calendars more than once daily) and only 6 per cent said their calendars were 'unimportant' to them in their 'work/daily/personal activities'. [1] Even people who live in less-developed economies without daily planners at their offices or printed calendars hanging on their kitchen walls still organise their lives calendrically. They look to nature's calendar of daily cycles of daylight/darkness and annual cycles of seasonal climate changes for guidance to time indoor versus outdoor activities and to know when it is best to plant, harvest, hunt, fish, ford the local river, and so on.

Perhaps the most global marketing implication of the marketplace's extensive use of calendars is that it is not enough for marketers to subscribe to the common marketing theme of understanding buyers and winning their hearts and minds. Rather, marketers must understand and win buyers' calendars, too. Brands may be of high quality, with the right features and the right price supported by a dedicated team of sales professionals and a communications programme that effectively conveys brands' desirable attributes; but these marketing efforts may not be enough. If buyers' schedules don't mesh well with a store's trading hours, if advertisers don't understand buyers' lifestyles and moods well enough to know when buyers are predisposed to purchase and consume, if buyers and sales representatives cannot agree upon mutually convenient times to meet, or otherwise if buyers' and sellers' calendars are not synchronised, many would-be impressions, interactions and transactions may never materialise — thus diminishing marketing effectiveness.

Stemming from an exploratory inquiry involving depth interviews with 64 marketing managers, focus groups with 170 consumers, and a review of existing literature and secondary data, the sections that follow first explore the calendar-led nature of the marketplace by dissecting the phenomena into some of its most fundamental principles. Specifically, five essential and interrelated principles are articulated and their managerial implications discussed, namely, principles of (1) cyclicality, (2) cyclical inequality, (3) networked calendars, (4) cyclical conformity and (5) questionable causality. Accompanying the discussion are examples of well-known companies that reflect the principles in their marketing initiatives, yet continue to be challenged by the principles and their implementation. Finally, a few suggestions are offered for organising, collecting and analysing data relevant to the practice of calendar-led marketing (CLM) — including both internal data already available in many organisations as well as data external to the organisation gathered by conducting a calendar marketing audit.

## PRINCIPLE OF CYCLICALITY: WHAT GOES AROUND COMES AROUND

Time is often thought of in a linear fashion — in terms of connecting the past, present and future, and with each period or event within each period leading to the next, which leads to the next, and so on. Linear thinkers discard expired dates on their calendars and move on to the next ones. Although linear time is certainly relevant, calendrical time is only partially linear. It is also cyclical.

According to Calendrical Cyclicality 101, each calendrical period follows another in predictable and reoccurring progression around at least four important cycles shown in Figure 1: time of day, day of week, day/period of month and day/period of year. Afternoon always follows morning, Monday predictably leads to Tuesday, the 17th of the month is always spliced between the 16th and the 18th, spring follows winter every year, the passing of 21st April will be followed by another 21st April in precisely one year, and so on.

Recognising and embracing the cyclical nature of time greatly enriches marketers' understanding of the roles and influence of time in the marketplace. Further, the predictable and recurring nature of cyclical time eliminates a significant portion of the uncertainty normally associated with forecasting and planning. For example,

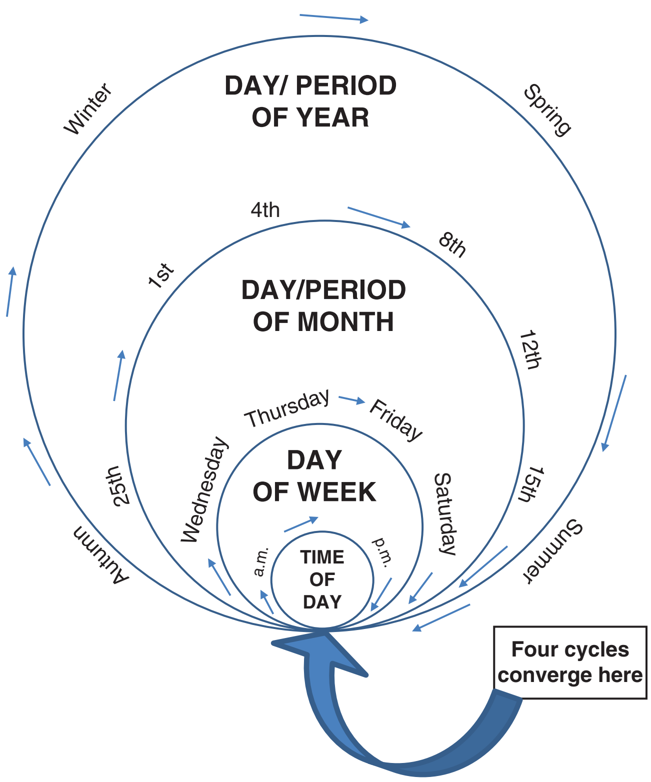


**Figure 1** Four major calendrical cycles of time and marketplace behaviour

brand managers who know when consumers purchase gifts for this year's annual holidays also know when those same windows of opportunity will open next year, and the year after that. Likewise, if they know the times of day and days of the week that prospective customers listened to the radio last week, they will also have a good idea of when those prospects are likely to be listening next week — and can plan the timing of future radio spots accordingly.

### Principle of cyclicality in action: McDonald's

McDonald's, the fast food giant with more than 36,000 restaurants throughout the world, recognises the cyclical nature of the marketplace in multiple ways. For example, the company understands the seasonal nature of demand for cold versus hot beverages, and burgers versus salads. McDonald's anticipates the recurrence of annual holidays and times adjustments in their menu accordingly, for example, with orange Pumpkin Spice milkshakes in October as Halloween approaches and with green Shamrock milkshakes in March as St. Patrick's Day approaches.

In scrutinising the cyclical nature of the company's demand, analysts have learned that McDonald's daily business cycle includes lull periods of demand from mid-afternoon to late-afternoon in a great number of their locations. They also recognise the annual cyclicality of their customers' lives in terms of birthdays celebrated annually — especially children's birthdays. Accordingly, McDonald's fills some of the afternoon valleys in demand by marrying the cyclicality of these two cycles. They do this by hosting children's birthday parties in the afternoons.

Despite the intuitively obvious appeal of this calendar-marketing tactic, however, McDonald's birthday party coordinators sometimes fall short of realising the full potential of the annual cyclicality of children's birthdays. While a 4-year-old child's birthday party on the 11th of this month, for example, certainly implies an open window of marketing opportunity for additional parties on or about the same date every year for the next few years, it is not uncommon for party coordinators to fail to seize the opportunity to invite parents to book parties in future years. Sometimes customer-contact information is not collected or not saved for follow-up, while in other instances turnover of birthday party personnel is so high that little, if any, organisational memory exists from year to year.

## PRINCIPLE OF CYCLICAL INEQUALITY: IF YOU HAVE SEEN ONE CALENDRICAL PERIOD, YOU HAVE SEEN *ONE* CALENDRICAL PERIOD

The calendrical cycles shown in Figure 1 may be used to plot the timing of an infinite number of marketplace behaviours and sentiments — those of buyers, organisations and competitors: When buyers visit websites, purchase widgets, watch television (including commercials), drive to work, drink coffee, dream of a family vacation, sense a need for a new coat, have time to shop or listen to a sales representative, have money to spend, and so on, or when stores or call centres are open for business, when prices are changed or new items introduced, when advertisements appear or cents-off coupons distributed, and so on.

When the timing of these and countless other marketplace behaviours and sentiments are plotted, an amazing, highly relevant and intuitively obvious principle becomes apparent: *The distribution of the timing of marketplace behaviours is rarely, if ever,* *evenly or randomly distributed across time periods.* Rather, recurring patterns of substantial temporal variation abound — across individuals, market segments, regions, product categories and types of businesses. Individuals, for example, do not sleep, eat, drive to work, watch television and brush their teeth at randomly distributed times, but do so during fairly predictable time slots. Indeed, studies of habits indicate that 40 to 45 per cent of daily human activities occur in about the same time and place as they did on the previous day.[2,3] Knowing when behaviour is likely to unfold promises to enhance forecasting and planning efforts as the ability to understand and predict the future improves the odds of planning effectiveness and efficient resource allocation.

Not surprisingly, the association of calendrical time periods with specific behaviours and accompanying sentiments frequently couched within them leads people to think about each time period uniquely — as if each period was its own brand. These calendrical brands became apparent when consumers and marketing managers were asked to talk about their most and least favourite times of day, days of week, periods of month and seasons of year. Almost all reported some calendrical preferences, and all acknowledged a variety of behaviours in their own lives and in their organisations that were associated with specific time periods. Consumers were quick to differentiate weekends from weekdays, morning routines from evening routines and the holiday season from back-to-school or lawn and garden seasons, as a few examples. Although not every calendrical period carries the same meaning across all buyers and all marketers, widely shared associations help explain why marketing communications assert that Jimmy Dean's brand breakfast croissants 'make every day taste like the weekend,' why 'Wendy's [U.S.-based fast food brand] salads taste like summertime,' and why dishes smell like 'morning freshness' after being washed with Dawn brand dishwashing detergent.

## Principle of cyclical inequality in action: Friday's restaurants

Friday's, the U.S.-based chain of 1,100 casual dining restaurants, is an obvious example of a firm that recognises the inequality of each day on the weekly calendrical cycle. The name of the company and its highly promoted advertising slogan that 'Every day is Friday at Friday's' implies that Friday is a special day of the week — one with a unique meaning that distinguishes it from other days of the week.

Traditionally, Friday is a transition day in the United States that marks the end of the five-day work-week and school-week, and the beginning of the weekend — a day to spend time to celebrate and relax. It is also the day of the week that American workers are most likely to be paid, so many U.S. consumers associate the day with money to spend. Consequently, the company taps into these positive day-of-week sentiments by suggesting that consumers can dine at Friday's restaurants on any day of the week, and, by doing so, they can always enjoy feelings of Fridayness.

However, like all calendrical periods, Friday's meaning can vary across cultures and individuals. Worldwide, Friday does not necessarily represent the end of the work-week or school-week and the beginning of the weekend. And, even in the United States where most of the company's restaurants are located, about 29 per cent of the workforce works during the weekend. Therefore, what Friday means to one consumer may be quite different from what it means to another. Over time, as Friday's expands geographically across cultures and political boundaries, as it has begun to do, the firm's efforts to position the corporate brand by associating it with its day-of-the-week namesake may be jeopardised.

## PRINCIPLE OF NETWORKED CALENDARS: WE'RE ALL CONNECTED

Contributing to the inequality of calendrical periods discussed is the networked nature of organisations' and buyers' calendars. That is, although buyers and sellers have their own calendars, none are independent. Rather, each calendar is immersed in an interdependent network of other calendars with each calendar shaping and shaped by the other calendars in the network. This is true because calendars are used, in part, as tools to synchronise the timing of meetings or activities across multiple parties, so it is understandable that synchronisation of calendars would involve some pushing, shoving and jockeying for position to optimise scheduling and minimise timing conflicts — especially as the number of activities, parties and calendars in the network increase.

The principle of networked calendars is highly relevant because it implies that neither buyers nor marketers operate entirely on their own in terms of choosing the timing of their actions. Thus, marketing success can hinge upon due consideration given to the spectrum of calendars at play in the marketplace.

More specifically, some of the calendars in the network are large, macro types, such as:

- Nature's calendar, whose regulation of daylight and weather/climate across time-of-day cycles and period-of-year cycles, for example, seems to suggest when we should sleep, venture outside, plant or harvest, shop for snow shovels, and so on.
- Cultural calendars, that prescribe when and how various holidays and other occasions should be observed, or what days of the week (if any) will be designated as the 'weekend' and what the weekend means, as examples.
- Legal calendars, that influence the timing of cash infusions in the marketplace (eg income tax refund season), or regulate the timing of marketplace behaviours (eg such as blue laws that prohibit the sale of alcohol on Sundays, curfews that restrict the late-night mobility of minors, and licenses that define the periods when it is permissible to hunt or fish).

Other network calendars are more local or individualised, but can exert tremendous influence on the timing of marketplace activities nonetheless. For example, the calendars of other family members, employers, schools and local institutions compete vigorously for time slots on consumers' calendars, while channel members, vendors, trade organisations and personnel can be influential in organisations' calendrical networks.

Employers' calendars are often double-edged, so to speak. First, employer-controlled work schedules greatly influence the amount and timing of workers'/consumers' discretionary time to shop or otherwise engage in the marketplace. And, second, employers' choice of paydays influence the timing of workers/consumers' spending habits. Gallup data from 2009 indicates that, on average, consumers spend about US $50 more during weeks in which they receive a paycheck than in weeks they do not.[4]

Retailers' hours of operation, when they offer 'seasonal' merchandise, when their prices are discounted, or when they are likely to be busy, crowded or out-of-stock may affect both their customers' and their competitors' timing decisions, and so on.

The important marketing implication of the principle of networked calendars is simply that it is not enough to convince the buyer and the buyer's calendar to act. Rather, accommodation or 'permission' of the network may be necessary, too. To the extent that the network influence is potent enough to preclude or severely restrict buyers' timing, other marketing efforts may be largely ineffective. A music fan may be very interested in attending the big concert on Thursday night, for example, but if his employer inflexibly schedules him to work that night, it is not likely that extra hoopla, slashed prices, front-row seats, free valet parking or a personal appeal from the musician herself will break the timing barricade created by the fan's calendar network.

On a more positive note, the calendrical network may help open windows of marketing opportunity during select periods — such as Monday holidays that create three-day weekends to promote tourism, travel and sale events, or sales tax holidays (in about one-third of U.S. states) that provide retailers with calendrical focal points to promote the sale of back-to-school merchandise such as school supplies, backpacks, laptop computers and children's clothing. In short, to understand the calendrical network and the extensiveness of its influence is to know which calendrical periods are likely to work for or against marketers — leading to adjustments in the timing of marketing efforts.

### Principle of networked calendars in action: Taco Bell

Taco Bell, the California-based chain of more than 6,500 Mexican food restaurants, has responded positively to the influence exerted by calendrical networks on one of its important target markets — teens and young adults — whose calendars are often constrained by multiple calendars in their networks, such as job, school, extracurricular and transportation calendars. In short, the company determined that many of these customers and prospective customers have hectic schedules that prevent them from eating during traditional dining hours. Therefore, in 2007, Taco Bell launched an attempt to legitimise dining during late-night, non-traditional periods with the introduction of its 'fourth meal' concept and accompanying promotional campaign. The company's marketing communications welcomed late-night customers and implied that there is no need to apologise for being hungry after others have finished eating for the day.

Unfortunately, however, it seems that the fourth meal spirit was not uniformly embraced throughout the company's operations. In some locations, an end-of-day service decay problem contradicted the marketing messages that welcomed late-night customers to Taco Bell. That is, personnel responsible for closing duties too often transformed the ambience of the physical facilities into what could be interpreted as a *non*-welcoming environment, and, thus, a less-than-fully-satisfying dining experience. For example, the transformed late-night atmosphere included the unsavoury aroma of cleaning fluids, chairs set atop tables and freshly mopped floors left wet and sometimes slippery. So, although Taco Bell's fourth meal calendrical initiative has been somewhat successful, it appears that the company's calendar-led marketers still have some work to do in terms of internally marketing the objectives of the fourth meal concept.

## PRINCIPLE OF CYCLICAL CONFORMITY: PRESSURE TO ADAPT

Timing norms and constraints imposed by calendrical networks create pressures for buyers and sellers to conform, that is, to synchronise their calendars with the other calendars in their respective networks. To illustrate the pressures to conform, consider these realities faced by consumers:

- Consumers know they can eat breakfast at any time of the day they wish, but if they choose to dine out, they know not to arrive at many restaurants after 10:30 a.m. when breakfast items are no longer served.
- Perhaps consumers could shop for clothes online any time they wish, but if they want to feel the texture of clothing items and try them on for fit before purchase, they may commit to visiting clothing stores — but only during the stores' trading hours.
- Vacation-goers also could frolic on the beach any month of the year they choose, but they know that many beaches are too cold or perhaps too hot to enjoy them year-round, so they conform to nature's calendar and visit the beach when the weather is accommodating.
- Of course, American consumers do not have to wait until Mother's Day to honour their mothers, but because they know mothers are likely to be saddened nonetheless if they are ignored on the second Sunday in May (Mother's Day in the United States), consumers mark that specific date in their calendars and plan to celebrate accordingly.

Conformity is one way to cope with the web of calendrical constraints and limitations imposed by the interlocking nature of the calendars in the network. Knowingly or unknowingly, willingly or unwillingly, individuals and organisations tend to succumb to the pressure and settle into cyclic routines or otherwise establish habits of doing certain things during certain calendrical periods. Established routines and habits tend to make life easier in the sense that once fine-tuned they serve much like heuristics, that is, they save network members from the otherwise continual distraction of coordinating multiple calendars and determining when to do what. It follows that in an age when an increasing number of people lament a shortage of discretionary time, established routines and habits may be defended vigorously and deviations resisted.

Interviewed consumers as well as marketing managers talked about conforming to calendrical network pressures by routinising or otherwise habitualising the calendrical timing of their behaviour. Typical respondents described first blocking out specific calendrical time slots for essential activities and those that must be done at certain times, such as work, school, sales calls during buyers' posted hours, meetings with their supervisors, and so on and then backfilling remaining calendrical periods with other activities optimally sequenced. By design or default, most respondents reported fitting activities into established routines and somewhat consistently adhering to the routines in an effort to stay organised and use time as productively as possible. Reported routines varied across respondents in terms of specific behaviours, sequence and detail, but most included several common and recurring elements. For example: Take the children to school in the morning followed by a trip through Starbuck's drive-through en route to work, then stop at the bank or grocery after work, meal preparation, dine, and then relax before retiring for the evening.

Respondents often reported problems associated with deviating from their routines, such as disruptions caused by over-sleeping, a sick child, traffic delays, working overtime and vehicle malfunctions, to name a few. Accordingly, commitments to cyclic routines, once established, are common and often there is a reluctance to engage in very many behaviours that disrupt the norms. Apparently recognising this, some calendar-led marketers use a behavioural piggyback approach to encourage consumers to tie a new and recommended behaviour to one that is already a part of their routines, rather than promoting a standalone behaviour. For example, marketers for the Rayovac brand of batteries remind consumers to check the batteries in their smoke detectors two times each year when they adjust their clocks for Daylight Saving Time. Or, as another example, coffee shops promote the habit of pausing for a cup of coffee while commuting to or from work. In these examples, because consumers are already committed to adjusting their clocks and commuting to work, it is only a small additional behavioural step to also check batteries and buy coffee.

### Principle of cyclical conformity in action: NatureMade vitamins

Recognising that consumers are creatures of habit and tend to organise their behaviour into routines to avoid the continual necessity of making conscious decisions about when to do what, NatureMade, a branded family of vitamins and nutrition supplements, uses a piggyback strategy to prompt consumers to ingest vitamins when they eat breakfast. In effect, NatureMade's recommendation links — or 'piggybacks' — what may be a relatively new and difficult-to-remember behaviour for some consumers (i.e. routinely taking vitamins) with one that is presumably an established part of one's daily cycle of activities and not likely to be forgotten (i.e. breakfast).

To further capitalise on the cyclical conformity principle, NatureMade packages its vitamins in the form of pills or tablets — each typically containing the recommended dosage for a 24-hour period. The dosages, of course, coincide with the daily calendrical cycle, which meshes well with daily routines. In contrast, consider the consumer challenge of remembering to take prescribed vitamins every 7 hours, 13 hours, 29 hours or some other temporal cycle that is not synchronised with the calendar.

Despite the appeal of the piggyback strategy, one potential risk of NatureMade's efforts to capitalise on consumers' propensity to gravitate towards cyclical conformity is the enduring or not-so-enduring nature of the established behaviour — breakfast — upon which vitamin consumption is piggybacked. That is, consumers who frequently skip breakfast may frequently skip vitamins, too. Another risk pertains to the body's ability to metabolise vitamins, in that if some vitamins, like some medications, cause symptoms such as drossiness or nausea for some consumers, customers may resist the intake of vitamins with breakfast — finding the symptoms too disruptive to their cycle of daily activities. To appeal to these symptom-sensitive market segments, NatureMade may face the daunting challenge of unravelling the behavioural routine they have historically recommended and replacing it with other timing recommendations.

## PRINCIPLE OF QUESTIONABLE CAUSALITY: WHICH CALENDARS LEAD, WHICH CALENDARS FOLLOW?

According to the principle of questionable causality, the factors that drive calendrical patterns of purchase, consumption and other buyer behaviours are not always apparent — especially when analyses are superficial. It is not always clear if buyers' calendrical timing reflects their personal preferences and habits, or the constraints imposed by sellers, nature, culture, legal or other calendars in buyers' networks. As a result, marketers analysing the same marketplace may vary first in their assessment of what, if anything, they can do to shape calendrical patterns, and then in their conclusions as to how limited marketing resources should be allocated across calendrical periods.

When demand patterns are characterised by seasonal peaks and valleys, such as the demand for snow shovels and mittens, as obvious examples, most retailers in a market might opt to shelve and promote these items only during the peak winter months when nature's calendar stimulates need and thus drives what these retailers perceive to be an inherent or 'natural' demand period that they believe does not exist at other times of the year. In contrast, one or a few retailers may reason — erroneously or not — that the absence of competition, lower prices from mitten and shovel suppliers, alternative product uses (eg gardening), and other possible considerations create open windows of marketing opportunity during warmer months too. Clearly, as assessments of the causality and controllability of calendrical patterns of market behaviour vary, so do the assessment of market potential, allocation of resources and marketing actions that follow.

One type of questionable causality is the *assumption of seasonality*. The potential trap is laid by the over-reliance on traditional practices in the industry, assurances of seasonality emphasised by channel members and historical sales data that seem to support the seasonal assumption. Admittedly, sales data suggest that 'virtually every product in every industry in every country is seasonal,'[5] but the so-called 'seasonal' merchandise may not necessarily be as inherently seasonal as one might be tempted to assume.

Eggnog, for example, is a 'seasonal' product in the United States, Great Britain and elsewhere, but its inherent seasonality is suspect. In one urban market, December alone accounted for 61 per cent of annual retail eggnog sales, while nearly 100 per cent of the year's sales were generated during the 11-week period from October 24 through January 8.[6] Therefore, the calendrically challenging marketing question is one of causality: Do consumers buy eggnog during this 11-week period because that is when they demand it, or do they buy eggnog then simply because that is when it is available in stores? Different answers could lead to quite different business decisions regarding calendrical availability — ranging from maintenance of the status quo to year-round distribution. In search of the answer, pouring over a store's sales data for recent years may lead to the assumption of seasonality, but sole reliance on historical sales data is clearly an insufficient basis for decision-making if eggnog is shelved for only 11 weeks each year.

Even for items determined to be largely seasonal, there still may be a devoted niche of high-involvement consumers willing to pay premium prices and travel out of their local neighbourhoods to purchase them year-round, if available. So, in many instances, serving such niches could be profitable for one or a few sellers in a market where most competitors blindly embrace the assumption of seasonality.

The aforementioned conflict between the marketing objectives of Taco Bell's 'fourth meal' concept and the company's operational practices illustrates how the principle of questionable causality also could be relevant on the daily calendrical cycle. That is, the deterioration of service quality as closing time approaches, evidenced by employees' preoccupation with closing duties and neglect of customers, could condition customers to avoid the premises late in the day. If problematic on a large scale, such customer-conditioning could lead management to misinterpret the causality of the timing of sales receipts and erroneously conclude that neither customers nor their calendars are interested in late-day operating hours.

Whether marketing snow shovels, mittens, eggnog or tacos, the principle of questionable causality should prompt marketers to look beyond historical patterns of sales data to assess which factors truly shape the calendrical timing of marketplace phenomena. A superficial analysis or otherwise failing to understand what drives buyers' timing can lead to suboptimum marketing decisions.

## ADDITIONAL IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MARKETING PRACTICE

Numerous specific implications for marketing practice are addressed in the sections above. Beyond these, a couple of categories of overarching implications and suggestions are now offered to further guide marketers in their calendar-led journey. The first pertains to the mining of internal data that may exist already, while the focus of the second is largely external and involves conducting a calendar audit of the marketplace.

### Identification of calendrical variation of internal marketing-relevant data

Without first understanding how marketplace behaviours and sentiments vary across calendrical periods, the selection of specific CLM practices cannot be defended and their effectiveness cannot be evaluated. Fortunately, advances in technology have helped make mountains of point-of-purchase data, customer data (eg through loyalty clubs/programmes) and other internal time-stamped data available for marketers' use, so the examination of data internal to the organisation is both a highly relevant and cost-efficient starting point in the assessment of calendrical influence. Accordingly, to glean calendrical insights from this data, four recommendations are suggested.

First, organise and analyse internal data across all four major calendrical cycles, that is, time-of-day, day-of-week, day/period-of-month, and day/period-of-year. Do this to confirm or refute patterns of variation intuitively or anecdotally thought to exist, to quantify the magnitude of variation and to greatly reduce the likelihood that significant patterns of variation will go undetected.

Second, because patterns of variation may be situational, it is suggested that data be analysed at multiple levels, for example, across products or categories, brands, store locations, market segments, and so on. The pattern or magnitude of variation found in one subset may not exist in others. Or, significant patterns of variation may go undetected if only aggregated data are analysed.

Third, don't stop with sales data. While the timing of sales transactions is certainly relevant, the calendrical influence on the marketplace extends far beyond sales, per se. Also relevant is the calendrical timing of actual consumption, as well as other variables that may indicate when buyers search for information or when they make purchase decisions — variables such as the timing of customer inquiries, online searches, store traffic, and so on.

Fourth, investigate possible linkages between the timing of marketing practices and buyer behaviours. Does variation in purchases or other buyer behaviours coincide with the timing of store hours, promotional efforts, sale events, price changes, product introductions or deletions, shelving of seasonal merchandise or other company practices? Do such practices tend to lead to similar market responses regardless of the calendar period, or do they tend to be more effective during some periods than during others? The answers to these questions can be helpful in understanding the extent to which the organisation's marketing efforts and other practices contribute to the variation in buyer behaviour — thus equipping marketers with useful insights regarding the best timing of various practices, and helping to avoid possible miss-steps such as those associated with the assumption of seasonality.

### Calendar audit of the marketplace

Potentially useful data regarding the calendar-led nature of the marketplace also resides outside the organisation. Particularly relevant are the calendrical tendencies of buyers, competitors and other constituencies (such as banks, shippers and intermediaries), and the impact of calendar networks that influence them (eg nature, culture, employers, schools, media, government, other customers, insurance companies, etc.). Accordingly, a systematic review of how and how much calendars affect the timing of marketplace behaviour may prove to be extremely helpful. Numerous questions might be investigated in such a calendar audit of the marketplace; but with regard to buyers, in particular, the following four questions represent important considerations:

- *When are buyers' product-related needs or interests likely to be highest?* Needs and interests may be led by nature's calendar (eg need for warm clothing in the winter) or by cultural calendars (eg interest in buying gifts for an upcoming holiday).
- *What is the timing of buyers' media habits?* The answer may suggest when to advertise to which target market(s) and in which media vehicles. Or, it may suggest when the media is a rival for buyers' time.
- *When do buyers receive income?* Increased spending tends to coincide with employers' choice of paydays.[7] Windfall periods such as the income tax refund season designated by the U.S. federal government represent marketing opportunities, too; in 2014, 73 per cent of U.S. taxpayers received refunds averaging US $2,792.[8]
- *When do buyers have discretionary time?* Job, school and other time commitments can limit the time available and the timing options for consumers' shopping and consumption activities. About 71 per cent of the U.S. workforce does not work on weekends,[9] so daily consumer spending tends to be higher on the weekends than during the week.[10]

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

To heighten awareness of the influential roles that calendars play in the marketplace, readers were challenged to consider an assertion with substantial implications for marketing practice and scholarship, but one that remains under-researched: *Calendars may be the most widely used and most influential marketing planning tools in the world*. In exploring this multi-faceted possibility, the calendar-led nature of the marketplace was discussed. With few exceptions, if any, buyers refer and defer to the calendar when coordinating with others and planning their day-to-day affairs. Likewise, calendar-led marketers tend to be respectful of the calendar when developing the content and planning the timing of their marketing efforts. But when buyers' and marketers' calendrical timing is poorly synchronised, marketing efforts are likely to fail. It follows that a deep understanding of the use and influence of calendars in the marketplace promises to improve the effectiveness and cost-efficiency of marketing practices.

To lay the groundwork for such an understanding, five principles were articulated and discussed. Numerous examples were included in the discussion to illustrate some of the many calendar-led practices used by organisations today — including some practices that might be improved upon in the future. First, the *principle of cyclicality* highlights the recurring and, therefore, predictable nature of time and accompanying behaviours — with particular focus on daily, weekly, monthly and annual cycles.

Second, the *principle of cyclical inequality* asserts that the timing of marketplace behaviours is rarely, if ever, evenly or randomly distributed across time periods. Such distributions imply that windows of marketing opportunity are more likely to open during some calendrical periods than during others.

Third, the *principle of networked calendars* suggests that buyers and organisations do not have complete control of their calendars. Rather, calendars are embedded within larger networks of calendars, with each influencing and each influenced by the other calendars in the network. Marketers cannot hope to fully understand buyers' calendars or their own calendars without giving due consideration to the constellation of influences at play in the networks.

Fourth, the *principle of cyclical conformity* maintains that the timing norms and constraints imposed by calendrical networks pressure members of the network to conform, that is, to synchronise their calendars with those of others in the respective network. This phenomenon leads to the adoption of routines and habits timed to coincide with calendrical periods — thus increasing the predictability of behaviour and, as a result, when windows of marketing opportunity are likely to be open.

Fifth, recognition of the *principle of questionable causality* should prompt marketers to avoid superficial analyses that lead to quick and potentially erroneous conclusions about what drives calendrical patterns of marketplace behaviour. Erroneously assuming that the demand for a product or brand is inherently seasonal is one type of error in the attribution of causality that could lead marketers to make suboptimum timing decisions.

Next, practising marketers were encouraged to take a systematic approach to investigate the extent to which calendars influence the marketplace in which they operate. Specific suggestions for organising and analysing internal data were offered first, followed by a few questions that may be used in a calendar audit of the marketplace to extend the investigation beyond the organisation and its immediate touch points.

Whether or not marketers conclude that calendars are the most widely used and most influential marketing planning tools in the world, a heightened sense of calendrical timing promises to enhance the timing and content of marketing plans nonetheless. As much-needed research further illuminates the influence of calendars on the timing of marketplace behaviours and the uniqueness of each calendrical period, marketers are likely to vary their practices across time periods, as appropriate. Further, as more is learned about which calendrical periods represent open or closed windows of marketing opportunity, depending on the brand, product category, market and other circumstances, the allocation of limited marketing resources is likely to become more selective as marketers increasingly 'pick their spots', so to speak, and not feel compelled to maintain an equally intense or even constant presence in the marketplace across all calendrical periods. Accordingly, calendrical timing soon may become the fifth 'P' of marketing — 'Period' — sharing the marketing limelight with the traditional and well-recognised marketing mix elements of Product, Promotion, Price, and Place (distribution).

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