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# Reflections of Eminent Marketing Scholars

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# Reflections of Eminent Marketing Scholars

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## ABSTRACT

This “Reflections” collection contains essays from stellar marketing scholars. These contributors were asked to consider and comment on something about their careers, something that they experienced and learned from, in the spirit of offering guidance to junior marketing scholars. These essays will impress the field, once again confirming the eminent stature of these fabulous people—we respect and admire them, and they inspire us.

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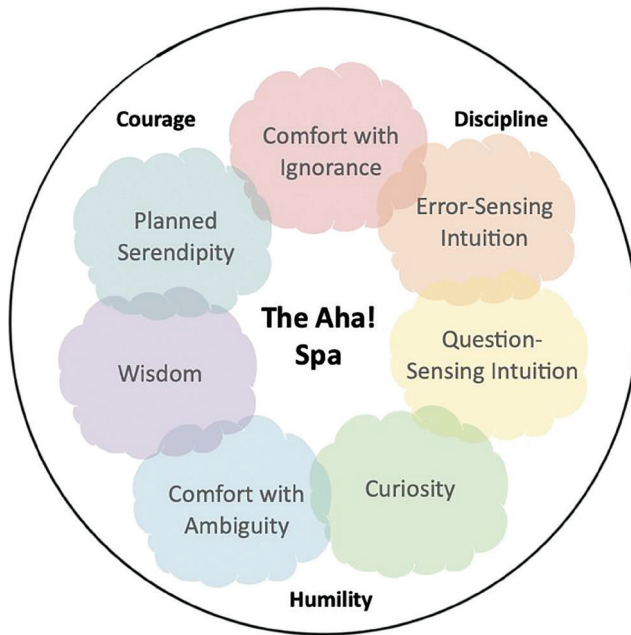
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## Open or Closed? Your Mind, Your Decision!

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Gerald Zaltman, Harvard University

The marketing profession faces challenging times. The shelf life for decisions and the half-life of the knowledge used, are becoming shorter and shorter while the problems addressed are becoming messier. Fortunately, the emergence of what I call the “prosthetic age” is enhancing our ability to identify, collect, store, retrieve, and process information. These enhancements require open-mindedness, a task not for the faint-of-heart. An open mind has the discipline, courage, and humility to examine how it works and is willing to make improvements. It embraces *curiosity*, befriends *ignorance*, and finds comfort with *ambiguity*. It allows its intuitions about *errors* and *questions* the scope to operate in *other fields*. It also cultivates *wisdom*. These qualities or tools, the focus of this paper, create a readiness to change ways of thinking which may lead to new thoughts. A closed mind shrinks from these activities or performs them in a perfunctory way and generates fewer ideas with which to innovate.



**Figure 1:** Primary and supporting qualities of an open mind.

*Source:* Gerald Zaltman, *Open or Closed? Your Mind, Your Decision!* (in preparation).

### Why These Qualities?

My favorite topic to explore with business executives and other accomplished professionals is how they think and feel when addressing challenging problems. This is usually explored in lengthy, one-on-one ZMET interviews. Periodically a group of interviewees is assembled for a findings feedback session where they react to my insights. The discussions are animated and informative. There is also broad agreement about the significance of the seven qualities featured in Figure 1. The outer ring identifies three supporting traits highlighted by interviewees. Together with the seven qualities they help create Aha! moments. A discussion of these traits and Aha!Spa notion, which relates to an insight experience, is beyond this paper. All elements in Figure 1, however, are a system. While each is distinctive they share family resemblances.

More importantly, they engage in substantial cross talk and thus have a catalytic presence in each other's operations.

### **Comfort with Ignorance**

Ignorance is often seen as a foe, but ignorance—not knowing—is our natural state. It is the birthplace for errors which encourage questions that stimulate curiosity, bringing us to other fields, and encourage the embracing ambiguity. It is where potential new knowledge lives, an excellent reason to befriend ignorance. Brains, too, are admirably equipped to make decisions in the presence of ignorance. Whether this occurs depends on the decision-making climate. Are errors and risk taking punished? Is a willingness to try new things rewarded?

### **Error-Sensing Intuition**

An intuition about the presence of errors helps uncover unwarranted prior beliefs, ones we believed to be justified but were not. Many times, our assumptions about the validity, reliability, or relevance of what was judged true can prove to be wrong in some way. Our beliefs and assumptions are often hidden from conscious view. As a result, our zones of ignorance are likely far wider than we suspect.

### **Question-Sensing Intuition**

Questions have the power to define the boundaries of our ignorance zones and the depth of our knowledge deficiency. Questions birth answers, much as caterpillars give rise to butterflies. An intuition about what sorts of questions to ask helps orient answer seekers in beneficial directions and steers them away from unproductive ones. In this way, questions define what we learn and what we remain ignorant about.

### **Curiosity**

A need to know generates curiosity. Curiosity is evolution's way of shrinking ignorance zones. It is not an unlimited resource, however.



Its deployment requires triage among the many errors and potential fault lines messy problems present. Curiosity's job is to select the most relevant issues and most productive questions to explore. This requires at least an informal mapping of ignorance zones, selecting the most promising issues, and then acquiring and delivering insights.

### **Comfort with Ambiguity**

Ambiguity exists at the interface of what is and is not known. It arises when desired problem-solving information is unavailable, incomplete, or its meaning unclear. It is where imagination ought to be most welcomed. Imagination is one of the most powerful tools brains have evolved to assist decision making in ambiguous situations created by missing knowledge.

### **Wisdom**

Wisdom arises from understanding that important ideas involve a mix of art, science, intuition, and imagination. It entails the humble use of what is known together with an appreciation of its limits and what might exist beyond those limits to generate workable insights. Wisdom recognizes the fallible nature of most knowledge and applies it cautiously, achieving a delicate balance between confident knowing and constructive doubting. As one interviewee put it, "Wisdom is knowing shoes provide protection but that not every shoe is healthy for every foot."

### **Planned Serendipity**

An essential feature of thinking is the ability to categorize experience. Experiences in one category can be used to understand experiences in other categories. This is the essence of metaphor and analogy, without which meaningful human thought is greatly diminished. Seeing one thing as like, but not the same as, another is instrumental in both creating and expressing a novel thought. Marketing finds many of its metaphors by being attentive to how disciplines address analogous problems. This

requires being curious about other fields and embracing their novel ideas and associated ambiguities.

### **The Kindling and the Spark for Open Minds**

The seven qualities are particularly important when decision makers encounter two major forces. The first provides the *kindling* for an open mind's fires and the second that provides a *spark for ignition*.

#### **Force No. 1: Messy Problems**

Whether a decision maker has an open or closed mind becomes evident in their approach to messy problems. These have one or more of these traits: (1) it may only exist on the fringe of awareness, i.e., we sense something wrong without knowing what; (2) it is recognized but poorly understood; (3) it is understood but lacks workable solutions; (4) the need to resolve it is urgent; and (5) it has a major emotional impact on managers. When executives and other professionals describes these dimension their choice of metaphors is very revealing. Metaphors typically involve devastating acts of nature, e.g., hurricanes, earthquakes, and floods from which they seek protection. In further explaining their metaphors, interviewees describe feeling intimidated, overwhelmed, victimized, angry, frightened, or enslaved. Success in resolving messy problems is described by other metaphors such as reaching the top of a mountain after an arduous climb, the jolt of smelling salts, finding the right path after a harrowing search for it, and surviving a near drowning. These reveal the deeper metaphor of a transformational journey. This brings us to what sparks an open mind.

#### **Force No. 2: Awe**

This concept is not new in the history of ideas. Few ideas are though it is a relative newcomer in social-science research. A good starting point for readers is Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt's work.<sup>1</sup> The authors

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<sup>1</sup>Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt (2003), "Approaching Awe, A Moral, Spiritual, and Aesthetic Emotion," *Cognition and Emotion*, 17(2), 297-314.

describe vastness and accommodation as two necessary dimensions of awe. As noted, these can typify the experience of a messy problem. Each dimension has a bright and dark side, which produce emotional highs and lows. The authors describe vastness as: "... anything that is experienced as being much larger than the self, or the self's ordinary level of experience or frame of reference. Vastness is often a matter of simple physical size, but it can also involve social size such as fame, authority, or prestige."<sup>2</sup> All emotions have a physical component, and awe is no exception, e.g., awe is associated with goosebumps and chills. And a sudden insight while engaged with a messy problem can involve opioid receptors in certain brain cells.

Awe's second dimension is accommodation. This is the change in thinking that awe can produce or messy problems demand. Changes may appear to be sudden but are likely to result from a longer, unconscious process of *idea creep*. According to the authors, "Accommodation refers to the Piagetian process of adjusting mental structures that cannot assimilate a new experience. . . Awe involves a challenge to or negation of mental structures when they fail to make sense of an experience or something vast."<sup>3</sup>

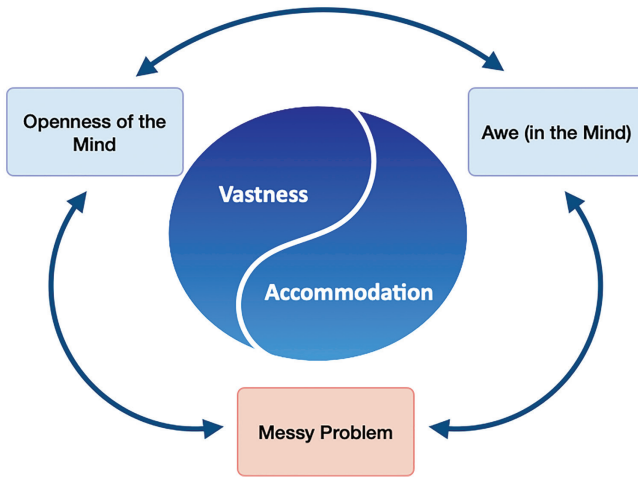
### **Messy Problems, Awe, and Open Minds**

Living in disruptive times brings an ample supply of messy problems. These can be daunting and demand change in how and what we think. These are compelling reasons for becoming more open-minded in our professional, civic, and personal lives. The seven qualities introduced can help us open the doors to our minds wide. Each brings some challenge with it, including the likely need to alter our thinking. This is represented in Figure 2 where the double-headed arrows remind us how interconnected all the elements are. Each is a potential cause and an effect of the others.

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<sup>2</sup>Keltner and Haidt, *ibid*, 303.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid*, 304.



**Figure 2:** Interaction of openness, awe, and messy problems.

Source: Gerald Zaltman, *Open or Closed? Your Mind, Your Decision!* (in preparation).

## Gerald Zaltman Biography

[Gerald Zaltman](#) is the Joseph C. Wilson Professor of Business Administration Emeritus at the Harvard Business School. He is a co-founder of Olson Zaltman Associates whose clients include some of the world's most respected firms and brands. Professor Zaltman taught previously at Northwestern University and University of Pittsburgh.

His research is on customer behavior and marketing strategy. His book, *How Customers Think: Essential Insights into the Mind of the Market* has been translated into 15 languages, received several awards, and has ranked among the top five selling business books in North America and Europe. His most recent book is *Unlocked: Keys to Improve Your Thinking*.

Professor Zaltman consults to corporations around the globe and is a frequent keynote speaker. His patent, ZMET, is used around the world by major firms and agencies, and has been described as the most significant innovation in market research in more than two decades.

His awards include AMA's Richard D. Irwin Distinguished Marketing Educator, ACR's Distinguished Fellow, ARF Member Recognition, MIT's Buck Weaver Award for outstanding work in bringing knowledge

and practice together, Sheth Foundation Gold Medal for Exceptional Contributions to Marketing Scholarship and Practice, AMA Fellow, and The AMA's Charles Coolidge Palin Award for Marketing Research Impact.

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