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The Evolution of Marketing in Renato Fiocca's Scholarship and Thought

From industrial marketing to integrated communication, from B2B2C relationships to humanistic management, Renato Fiocca's contributions have accompanied the evolution of marketing as a discipline focused on value creation. This article traces some key milestones in his scholarly work over time, accentuating his ability to combine theoretical rigor, managerial insight, and a forward-looking understanding of change. What emerges is a vision of marketing as a relational, cultural, and strategic infrastructure, capable of connecting businesses, markets, stakeholders, and society.

MARKETING//VALUE CREATION//BUSINESS RELATIONS//INTEGRATED COMMUNICATION//HUMANISTIC MANAGEMENT



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“From going to market to creating value for the customer, for the company, for society”: This is how Renato Fiocca¹ summarized the discipline's evolutionary path in one of his lectures on the history of marketing. A trajectory that reflects the progressive expansion of marketing from a supply-oriented function to a field that comprehends value creation processes and the relationships between companies, markets, and stakeholders. And Fiocca has been leading us on this journey, anticipating and interpreting some of the key changes in the economic, social, and managerial landscape. During the event dedicated to him, *Dialogues on Marketing* (2025), his vision emerged

¹ A Full Professor of Marketing at the UCSC from 2002 to 2024 and Scientific Director of Centrimark (UCSC's Marketing Research Center) from 2002 to 2021, Renato Fiocca previously conducted research and taught at Bocconi University (1977–2001) and the University of Italian Switzerland (1998–2004).

APPLYING INDUSTRIAL MARKETING: EVIDENCE FROM MANAGERIAL PRACTICE

Clemente Bottani, Managing Director, Giottoindustrial Networking SA

When I arrived as a student at Bocconi University for Renato Fiocca's Commercial Organization course, I immediately appreciated the approach, which was both profound and practical. The concepts of relationships and networks were not presented as theoretical abstractions, but as operational tools for understanding the complex functioning of markets and guiding the positioning of companies.

Fiocca was later my supervisor for my thesis. From that period, I recall the stimulating discussions, and his encouragement and careful guidance as I conducted an experimental analysis of how the Uppsala School's theory aligned with real life business, in synergistic combination with the classic

tools of operational marketing. This journey led me to develop a way to envision the relationship between a given business and its environment that has proven useful throughout my entire professional career.

In my view, this represents one of Fiocca's most significant contributions to B2B marketing (which we then called industrial marketing), an approach that met with initial resistance but was subsequently adopted in the managerial sphere. When, in the early 1990s, I applied this philosophy and its analytical tools to the first strategic market analysis I did for the German chemical giant I worked for, there was plenty of criticism and just as much astonishment. But in no time, the work sparked great interest at the highest levels thanks to its demonstrated ability to interpret the market and competitive trends.

with particular clarity, spanning various areas of his research: from industrial marketing and business networks to integrated communication to themes like sustainability, new consumers, and humanistic management. This vision was expressed not only in his research but also in his classrooms and in dialogues with managers and entrepreneurs. His lectures have shaped generations of students, fostering not only technical skills but also critical thinking, curiosity, and the ability to navigate complexity. In this sense, his teaching echoes the idea, attributed to Plutarch, that "students are not vessels to be filled, but torches to be lit."

The following sections trace, in chronological order, some of Fiocca's major contributions to the development of marketing studies.

INDUSTRIAL MARKETING

The first phase of Fiocca's research focused on industrial marketing and business relationships between companies. In the 1980s, a body of international research dedicated to industrial markets began to take shape, based on the recognition of certain characteristics specific to these markets:

high concentration, organizations as customers, rational purchasing behavior, and supplier-customer relationships that are often complex and long-lasting. Until then, industrial marketing had been treated as a derivative of consumer marketing, which was considered true marketing and the primary point of reference in textbooks. A shift began in the mid-1970s, initiated by the "Scandinavian School:" the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing Group (IMP). This consisted in recognizing, on the one hand, the economic significance of industrial markets and, on the other, the fact that their specific features depended not so much on the nature of the product as on the nature of the buyer, as well as the interactive and often complex nature of the exchange. Hence the need for approaches and tools that are distinct from those used in consumer markets.

Fiocca helped introduce and consolidate industrial marketing in Italy as an independent field of research. Drawing in part from his experiences abroad, he facilitated the transfer and adaptation, within the Italian context, of the main theoretical advancements that were evolving internationally.² This he complemented with original work on the analysis and management of the business client portfolio, based on the idea that in industrial

² The time he spent in the US in the early 1980s consolidated his understanding of international literature on industrial marketing. See, in particular, Fiocca (1981) and Fiocca (1982).

markets, suppliers must deal with relationships that differ in terms of attractiveness and managerial complexity, compared to consumer markets.

Of particular note are also his studies on the market as a network of relationships among firms and on strategies in networked markets, which he developed in part through dialogue with Ivan Snehota, one of the founders of the IMP Group. Indeed, the theme of relationships in business represents a common thread in his scholarly work, reemerging in his subsequent writing as well. During this same period, Fiocca also promoted a vision of the firm as a borderless entity, emphasizing the need to interpret competitive strategies not only at an aggregate level but also in relation to the most strategic customers.

The ability to combine theoretical rigor with a focus on managerial practice is one of the hallmarks of Fiocca's approach, making him a standard-bearer not only for the academic world but also in the spheres of the business and management.

CORPORATE COMMUNICATION

In the framework of Italian studies on corporate communication, Fiocca's contribution represents a major milestone in the theoretical and managerial systematization of a discipline that, in the early 1990s, still appeared fragmented. With the paradigm of integrated communication, he proposed a unified model, helping to legitimize communication as a structural component of corporate governance. His reflection stems from the awareness that the contemporary enterprise operates within increasingly open boundaries, in an environment characterized by multiple relationships as well as economic, technological, social, and cultural dynamics that are ever more intertwined.

In this scenario, Fiocca saw the need to move beyond a narrow view of communication, one that is limited to marketing or a specialized function, to establish a cross-functional, systemic approach. Integrated communication emerged as a response to the fragmentation of languages, tools, and processes. This suggested that the main areas of corporate

communication—marketing, institutional, internal, and economic-financial—had to be strategically coordinated as distinct yet interdependent domains (Fiocca, 1994). Integration is therefore not simply aligning messages; it is the process of achieving strategic coherence between communication, identity, and long-term objectives. From this perspective, communication also becomes an enabling factor to unify the corporate system (Zappa, 1957), shaping the company's internal cohesion as well as its ability to interact with the external environment.

A second noteworthy theoretical contribution concerns the relationship between communication and value creation. Fiocca offered an original expansion of the perspective proposed by Guatri (1991), extending the concept of value to the intangible dimension of the enterprise and recognizing that communication plays a direct role not only in the dissemination but also in the generation of value. In other words, Fiocca saw communication as a strategic resource that serves to strengthen intangible assets: identity, image, and reputation. This distinctive capital is difficult to imitate and has the potential to sustain competitive advantage over time. Economic value, in this perspective, is intertwined with other forms of value (relational, social, cultural) that communication produces and amplifies, fostering trust, credibility, and legitimacy. In this sense, communication allows us to move beyond a strictly economic interpretation of value, which emerges as a factor that governs relationships with the company's internal and external stakeholders. In studies dedicated to this novel view of communication (Fiocca, 1999), it is seen as a relational infrastructure that supports the development of knowledge and trust, central categories in resource-based logic.

Another distinctive feature of Fiocca's thinking is his focus on the relationship between theory and managerial practice. While working to build a conceptual framework, Fiocca firmly grounded in the realities of business and related operational needs, demonstrating that integrated communication is not merely an abstract concept but a model that can provide concrete guidelines for organizational and managerial decisions.

COMMUNICATION AS STRATEGIC INFRASTRUCTURE: THE RELEVANCE OF FIOCCA'S THOUGHT

Stefania Boleso, corporate consultant and trainer, adjunct professor, UCSC, Milan

When I arrived as a student at Bocconi University for Renato Fiocca's Product Management course in 1992, I immediately appreciated his teaching approach: rigorous in form, yet profoundly visionary in substance. From the very first lessons, his ability to anticipate changes and to make seemingly abstract concepts concrete was clearly evident. Through examples he drew from the business world, such as his reflections on naming illustrated through Alessi's design products, Fiocca demonstrated how every communicative choice was in reality a strategic positioning choice.

In the years that followed, he consistently demonstrated his extraordinary consistency and depth of analysis. His quick thinking and ability to interpret organizational phenomena in all their complexity are still the defining features of his approach, as is his constant encouragement to take nothing for granted and to engage in critical inquiry to generate connections, opportunities, and new interpretive pathways. A method that fostered not only technical skills but, above all, a managerial mindset grounded in questioning, taking responsibility, and embracing a systemic vision.

Today, in a context marked by hyper-transparency, speed, and

interconnectivity, Fiocca's insights on integrated communication are highly relevant. The web and social media platforms are proof of what Fiocca theorized years before: every organizational action takes on communicative significance for diverse audiences and produces effects on a variety of stakeholders, with reputational and economic consequences.

The crises that periodically affect global brands across various sectors demonstrate just how crucial consistency is between marketing communication, corporate communication, and the company's authentic values. Similarly, the debate on brand activism—so central today—makes it clear that communication can no longer be viewed as a cosmetic or tactical exercise, but rather as a process of managing relationships and trust that involves the entire organization.

Renato Fiocca's contribution goes far beyond the theoretical systematization of corporate communication. His most valuable legacy lies in having promoted a vision of communication as a strategic infrastructure capable of connecting identity, actions, and relationships: not a specialized function, but a governing principle that links functions, processes, and stakeholders. A perspective that continues to offer relevant interpretive lenses for understanding the complexity of contemporary communication, where the challenge is not to communicate more, but to communicate in a coherent and authentic way, taking responsibility for one's choices.

In particular, such communication requires a rethinking of corporate structures and decision-making processes, encouraging organizations to move beyond traditional hierarchies to adopt more flexible coordination approaches, consistent with the evolution toward polycentric, networked organizational forms (Fiocca, 1999). In this way, communication transforms from a specialized function to a governing principle, linking functions, processes, actors, and organizational levels, supporting a vision of the enterprise as a “*communicative business*” (Brioschi, 2008).

Finally, Fiocca's thinking fits into the broader evolutionary trajectory of Italian business and economic sciences, engaging with established traditions and enriching these perspectives thanks to a new sensitivity to the role of relationships, trust, and intangibles in the enterprise. In this vision, communication is not merely a cost or a set of persuasive techniques, but a generative process that contributes to the vitality of the company

and the ability of its leaders to pursue long-term goals while maintaining a harmonious relationship with the environment.

B2B2C RELATIONSHIPS

In this most recent phase of his thinking, Fiocca consolidates a vision of marketing as a lens through which to view value creation processes and the relationships between companies, markets, and stakeholders. From his earliest publications, he proposed an understanding of marketing that transcends the purely operational dimension, situating market choices within the company's development processes and the competitive systems in which it operates.

In his work, he does not consider marketing a mere business function, but a relational and cultural infrastructure that connects strategies,

FROM PRODUCT INNOVATION TO STRATEGIC CHANGE: A MANAGERIAL EXPERIENCE

Stefano Ferro, CEO, Borbonese

My adventure with Renato began in the early 1980s, when I was Head of Product Strategy at Bticino. The project [we were working on] involved developing a new product concept that would later become one of the first examples of home automation. The goal was to transform the traditional light fixture into a system that could integrate more complex functions, anticipating solutions that are now commonplace.

The goal was to build on the success of the “Magic Series,” a line that had redefined industry standards. So the challenge was not only technical but also strategic: We needed to envision a new offering that could change the way the product itself was conceived. From the very beginning, Fiocca recognized the centrality of innovation not only as a technical element but as the guiding principle for the entire project. His insistence on viewing innovation almost as the product itself was decisive: an intangible element intended not only to inspire the structure and content of the offering but also something that would be perceived through the product.

This approach led to a profound rethinking of the product line: design, materials, color palettes, and communication methods were all redefined. Although operating in a B2B market, the company gradually shifted toward a more consumer-driven orientation, anticipating approaches now associated with branding.

That’s how the “Living Series” project became an international benchmark, helping to redefine the sector’s offerings and paving the way for subsequent advancements, including the proliferation of home automation. Throughout this process, Fiocca distinguished himself thanks to his ability to integrate product definition with strategic vision, while consistently prioritizing the people involved.

For me, it was a unique experience of teaching and learning: steering the project in the desired strategic direction while simultaneously mobilizing the best resources in a positive way. It was a lesson that left a lasting mark on my approach to project development and managing organizational dynamics.

organizational structures, and operational decisions. From this perspective, long-term relationships, intangible assets, and trust take on a central role in building and maintaining competitive advantage.

A particularly innovative strand of his work concerns the relationship between marketing policies and the corporate value system.³ From this perspective, marketing becomes a space where market orientation, social responsibility, and corporate identity converge: Decisions regarding positioning, innovation, and brand management represent expressions of corporate culture and the company’s efforts to establish legitimacy among various target audiences. This approach ties into business ethics, governance studies, and economic sociology, highlighting how marketing contributes not only to satisfying demand but also to generating shared meanings and forms of social recognition.

Fiocca’s interest in the intersections between marketing and digitalization represents another direction in his thinking.

In the digital context, he equates the marketing process with the co-creation of symbolic value. In fact, digital technologies redefine the boundaries between production and consumption and foster active user participation.

This interdisciplinary orientation is also reflected in Fiocca’s use of analytical categories derived from studies on networks, local systems, and clusters, through which he interprets business behavior and market strategies. In various research projects coordinated over time, the firm is systematically situated in networks where cooperation and competition coexist, and marketing serves to orchestrate inter-organizational relationships, complementarities, and knowledge flows. This results in a view of the market as a dynamic system of relationships, in which innovation choices, channel policies, and communication activities can only be understood in light of systemic logic and institutional constraints.

Finally, Fiocca’s contribution also extends to the institutional and educational dimensions of

³ See Fiocca and Sebastiani (2015).

PURPOSE, RESPECT, AND THE BOUNDARIES OF THE ENTERPRISE: A LESSON IN HUMANISTIC MANAGEMENT

Federico Mioni, former Director of Federmanager Academy, professor in the Master's programs at UCSC, IULM University, and the University of Pisa

Renato Fiocca, in the course of his extensive work, has also devoted attention to the themes of humanistic management, both in terms of the purpose and the deep motivations that should guide businesses, and in relation to the ability to draw on the classics to derive useful insights for management, albeit with the necessary mediations. In particular, I was struck by the fact that Fiocca repeatedly cited the Greek and Latin classics, raising two themes of particular importance as early as 2007.

The first is the boundaries of the enterprise, which, according to Fiocca, needed to be expanded not only in the sense of sharing information but also of sharing perspectives, to become the subject of open, honest discussion. It is worth noting that he raised this theme before the 2008 crisis, which would later reveal the limits of a certain form of capitalism

oriented toward the short term and bent to the logic of speculative finance. The second is respect in the dynamics that exist inside and outside the company, understood not as mere etiquette, but as a set of values that should underpin relationships among economic actors (from SMEs to the pocket-sized multinationals in our country, up to full-fledged multinationals) and the relationships among institutional decision-makers in economic matters.

The forms of this idea of respect, ranging from the corporate microcosm to the contexts of large enterprises as well as economic relations among institutional actors, constitute central elements of humanistic management which today appears to be called into question at both the macro and micro levels. Yet in times marked by intense geopolitical and economic tensions, in which the rule of force often seems to prevail over the rule of law, a lecture such as Renato Fiocca's serves as a source of inspiration for businesses and institutional decision-makers alike.

**The specific reference is to Fiocca (2007).*

marketing. Through his leadership at Centrimark, UCSC's Marketing Research Center, and his participation in advanced marketing courses, he has promoted applied research, collaborations with businesses and institutions, and advanced training programs, fostering a constant dialogue between theory and managerial practice. Alongside his more specialized works, popular texts such as⁴ demonstrate his commitment to making marketing concepts and tools accessible to entrepreneurs, managers, and professionals, advancing the spread of a cross-functional marketing culture.

HUMANISTIC MANAGEMENT AND MEGA-TRENDS

Renato Fiocca's academic work and research endeavors have also addressed the major transformations currently reshaping the contemporary managerial landscape, with a particular focus on the rise of humanistic

management. The challenges posed by the pandemic prompted a Centrimark research group, led by Fiocca, to investigate the emergence of new managerial approaches in contexts characterized by uncertainty, turbulence, and discontinuity. An initial phase of the research examined decision-making processes in light of current megatrends, with particular reference to digitalization, sustainability, and the growing relevance of the humanistic perspective for managers and professionals working in diverse sectors. The study mapped organizations that were involved in transforming decision-making processes, the activities they planned and the resources they required and shared. Specific attention was devoted to interorganizational relationships, and the support they provided in reconfiguring value propositions and sustaining decision-making processes under highly complex conditions. This initial phase was followed by a multiple case study on the humanistic management strategies adopted by century-old

⁴ See Fiocca (2015).



MANAGERIAL IMPACT FACTOR

- **Marketing is not merely a business function**, but a lens through which we can understand the relationships between the company, the market, and stakeholders.
- **The ability to create value** depends on the integrated management of relationships, trust, reputation, and intangible assets.
- **Innovation requires consistency** between product, communication, positioning, and corporate culture.
- **Integrated communication is now essential** for managing reputation, transparency, and relationships with diverse stakeholders.
- **Humanistic management calls on managers and companies** to integrate economic performance, responsibility, respect, and social impact.

Italian companies and their ability to generate value for the market and for various stakeholders.

The humanistic management paradigm can be interpreted as a response to the limitations of an economic model focused primarily on profit maximization. This framework calls for reconciling the pursuit of business objectives with the expectations of various stakeholders, re-examining the role of the business and the entrepreneur in society, and

emphasizing the importance of business ethics (Solomon and Flores, 2023; Hicks, 2018). Early research findings point to a dual analytical perspective.

On the one hand, from an external perspective, humanistic management manifests in projects through which the company generates impacts on society and the local community where it does business (Laszlo, 2019). Particularly salient in this context is collaboration with stakeholders, the role of the local community, and the integration of economic, social, and environmental objectives, to include CSR and responsible marketing strategies (Guerci et al., 2019). On the other hand, from an internal perspective, humanistic management concerns employees and the organization: occupational health and safety, organizational climate, gender equality, inclusion, and wellbeing. These areas, which are linked to the development of internal marketing strategies, find two central pillars in the concepts of dignity and wellbeing (Hicks, 2018). Cooperation, relationships, and trust also emerge as fundamental drivers for building more humanistic managerial approaches (Pyrkosz, 2019).

Here too, we have further proof of Fiocca's ability to anticipate phenomena that are destined to profoundly impact the evolution of management. His focus on megatrends, the relationships between companies and stakeholders, and the humanistic dimension of managerial action has helped guide the evolution of new interpretive approaches.



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