Opportunities In The Market For Meaning In Life

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ABSTRACT
In an adaptation of the Luckmann thesis (1967), it could be said that there is a market for meaning in life. Suppose someone wants to enter this market with a business or organization that tries to alleviate meaninglessness. How can the person shape the proposition that s(he) wants to offer? We propose that Baumeister's (1992) theory of needs for meaning can serve as a useful tool. Baumeister states that meaning is generated when the needs for a goal, fulfillment, context, control, and self-worth are simultaneously met. Taking the market for alternative spiritual courses as a case example, we show that this theory is adequate for describing the variety of alternative spiritual courses in terms of a limited number of meaning models. Would-be providers on the market for meaning in life can create propositions by following, reordering, or creating meaning models. Examples of such propositions are given for a number of submarkets.

Keywords: Meaning in life, entrepreneurial opportunities, opportunity recognition

INTRODUCTORY NOTE: PRACTICING OPPORTUNITY RECOGNITION
Saks and Gaglio (2002) raised the question of whether opportunity recognition can be taught. They found that many lecturers felt more comfortable with teaching opportunity evaluation than with teaching opportunity recognition, as the former was felt to be easier to assess. Still, practicing opportunity recognition is crucial, as it is not only a core notion of entrepreneurship (Shane and Venkataraman, 2000), but it is also, in many cases, the starting point of the entrepreneurial process. In my opinion, three distinctions can be taken into account when devising opportunity recognition exercises.

First, process models of creativity typically include a preparation phase and an idea generation phase (Couger, 1995). For example, the Wallas’ model of creativity (1926, in Couger, 1995) includes the preparation, incubation, illumination, and evaluation phases; the Osborne-Parnes’ problem solving model (1967, in Couger, 1995) has fact-finding, problem-finding, idea-finding, solution-finding, and acceptance-finding as its phases. So opportunity recognition exercises can encompass preparation, or idea generation, or both. While idea generation (e.g., using a brainstorming technique) is an indispensable part of opportunity recognition, preparation may be even more important. Shane (2000), and Eckhardt and Shane (2003) have convincingly argued that opportunity recognition is shaped by prior knowledge. The ideas that a person comes up with depend on his or her idiosyncratic information or beliefs. Different people discover different things because they have
different information and because they evaluate information differently.

Second, within the domain of preparing for opportunity recognition, one can go in three directions. The first approach is to look inwards and to take one’s own competencies as a starting point. This approach has been developed by Fiet (2002), who called it a consideration set approach. In Fiet's training, the participant is asked to reflect on his or her main accomplishments and the competencies that helped to achieve these results. The competencies are related to information channels, and from these, new business opportunities are inferred. A second approach uses daily experience as a source of opportunity recognition. Based on the work by Kirzner (1997), and called an entrepreneurial alertness approach by Fiet (2002), a training based on this approach asks the student to be sensitive to experiences of irritations, problems, surprises, but also successes. From these experiences, one tries to infer new business opportunities. Finally, a third approach would be outward looking and analyze a market in terms of information categories that may induce the recognition of opportunities. One such approach has been developed by van Gelderen (2004). He labeled it the heuristics' approach as information is primarily gathered for its inspirational value. Five types of information about a particular market are studied: background information about the market; consumer wants, problems, and behavior; change factors affecting the market; innovations already taking place; and reconceptualizations of the market.

Third, case studies in opportunity recognition can be either retrospective or forward looking. In a retrospective study, the opportunity recognition process has already occurred and is backtracked (e.g., Anne Evans' assessment of a biotech opportunity, Evans and Varaiya, 2002). In a prospective study, the student is challenged to recognize opportunities for her or himself, an exercise strongly advocated by Davidsson (2002). Using the three distinctions made above, the case study to be found below can be categorized as preparational, outward looking, and forward looking.

CASE INTRODUCTION

This paper’s starting point is the idea that a market for meaning in life exists that consists of several submarkets. However, meaning in life can not be boxed and sold as a product or service in itself. One
can not go to the counter and ask for a kilogram or a glass of meaning. Rather, something else (for instance, a religious view) is offered which may induce a sense of meaning and purpose to be experienced in the process. Suppose someone wants to start a business or organization that tries to alleviate meaninglessness. How can the person shape the proposition that s(he) wants to offer? The purpose of this paper is to provide an answer to this question. We will show that Baumeister's (1992) theory of needs for meaning can be used in order to aptly summarize offerings on markets for meaning in life. A submarket of the market for meaning in life, the market for alternative spiritual courses (New Age/Neo Paganism) will serve as a case example.

A MARKET FOR MEANING IN LIFE

Sociologists have observed that because of processes such as modernization, secularization and individualization (Heelas, Lasch, & Morris, 1996) meaning in life is often not institutional, not always being handed down the generations anymore. Rather, people have to actively search for meaning. Notably, the decreased importance of institutional religion (e.g., the churches in Christian regions) is said to have caused a market for ultimate meaning:

"Once religion is defined as a 'private affair', the individual may choose from the assortment of 'ultimate' meanings as he sees fit (...), (...) selects certain religious themes from the available assortment and builds them into a somewhat precarious private system of 'ultimate' significance (...), (...) models of 'ultimate' significance are, of course, non-obligatory and must compete on what is, basically, an open market". (Luckmann, 1967, pp. 99/102/104; see also Percy, 2000).

While Luckmann emphasizes ultimate meaning and religion, empirical research shows that a philosophical or religious component in perspectives on meaning is not necessary. A study by Hijmans (1994), aptly called 'One has to make the best of it', shows that people are very able to experience their life as meaningful without having an articulated philosophy of life. As a consequence, markets for meaning can be conceptualized in which philosophies of life play no role.

This is confirmed by research about the sources of meaning. For example, O'Connor and Chamberlain (1996) describe six sources of meaning (relationships with people, personal development, creativity, nature, social/political activities, and religion/spirituality), of which only the last one necessarily comprises a philosophical element. Different sources of meaning indicate
different sectors on the market for meaning at large. In practice, the development of a market means that the share of formal, third, and outside parties increases compared to the share of informal or institutional provision, and that people can choose from various alternatives. Whether these third parties are profit or non-profit is not important for the present discussion. A development into markets can be observed, for example with regard to relationships (DeVogler and Ebersole, 1980) (markets for dating, marriage partners), nature (O'Connor & Chamberlain, 1996) (put a fence around it and ask for money), work (Dehler and Welsh, 2003) (on the labor market people demand meaningful work), and altruism (Yalom, 1980) (a market for charity, with charitable organizations competing for the donor’s money). These can all be considered submarkets for the market for meaning in life as a whole.

In sum, there is a market for meaning in life that is important for a significant amount of people. But what is meant by the claim that there is a market for meaning in life? How can one trade meaning on a market? What is a need for meaning in life, and how can a product or service fulfill this need? Someone who wants to be a provider on this market will be facing these questions. This provider should take notice of some special characteristics of the market for meaning in life. Firstly, whatever proposition the would-be provider develops, it can only facilitate a meaningful experience, and never directly induce it. It remains up to the customer whether he or she will indeed find the experience meaningful, and accepts a part or the whole of the proposition. Secondly, and of fundamental importance, nobody goes to a shop and buys a certain quantity of meaning in life. Meaning in life is not to be offered directly but is rather an experience that accompanies something else (for instance, a religious view). In order to be able to frame this ‘something else’ in terms of meaning in life some form of translation must be made ...

HOW TO ANALYZE MARKETS IN TERMS OF MEANING IN LIFE

In order to make this translation, it will be necessary for the would-be provider to understand the components of the meaning process and to know how these components can be translated in a product or service. In order to study what kinds of meaning are actually offered on a (sub)market for meaning in life it is necessary to discern the different components of meaningfulness. Battista and Almond
(1973) distinguish two dimensions: a conscious structure that provides context or a goal ("framework"), and an experience of relatedness, integration, and significance ("fulfillment"). Reker and Wong (1988) discern three dimensions. They state that people experience meaning in their beliefs (cognitive component), in their actions (motivational component), and in their feelings (affective component). Correspondingly, they define "personal meaning" as ‘the cognizance of order, coherence, and purpose in one’s existence, the pursuit and attainment of worthwhile goals, and an accompanying sense of fulfillment' (pp. 221).

Baumeister (1992) discerns five characteristics of the meaning process. First, there must be a goal. Second, this goal must be worthwhile to the person involved. Third, the goal must be justified in the sense that it is placed within a larger context. Fourth, the person must be able to reach the goal or at least be able to strive for the goal. Fifth, feelings of self-worth must be increased. Baumeister states that all conditions need to be met simultaneously if a meaning generating process is to occur. Baumeister conceives of these five elements as needs: people are hypothesized to need goals, fulfillment, context, efficacy, and self-worth. Baumeister's theory is more differentiated than the aforementioned theory of Battista and Almond, and it is less abstract than the theory of Reker and Wong. By use of Baumeister's theory it should be possible to describe the variety of offerings on any submarket of the market for meaning in life in terms of a limited number of underlying meaning models. This is exactly what we set out to do in the case study reported below, in which we analyze a particular submarket of the market for meaning in life: the market for alternative spiritual courses (ASCs). The derived meaning models will then serve as a basis for thinking about new propositions.

THE MARKET FOR ALTERNATIVE SPIRITUAL COURSES (ASCs)

We will now discuss the components of meaningfulness and describe a particular sector of the market for meaning in life in terms of these components: the market for alternative spiritual courses (ASCs). The market for alternative spiritual courses (ASCs) concerns courses known by the general public as New Age, or alternatively as Neo-Paganism (York, 2001). These courses became popular in the 1960s and 1970s, and have continued to increase in popularity (Houtman and Mascini, 2002). We have
chosen this particular market as a case example because we expected beforehand that meaning-seeking might be a central activity in this market. We expected the people who provide ASCs to be able to rephrase their courses in terms of the characteristics as specified by Baumeister. Easy rephrasing would indicate that the market for ASCs can indeed be conceived as a market for meaning in life. While verifying this expectation, the research question concerns meaning content: what kinds of meaning are offered in ASCs in terms of Baumeister's theory of meaning in life?

Method

The sample was collected by contacting people or organizations who offered ASCs in the region of Amsterdam, The Netherlands, and who advertised in a monthly agenda called 'De Koörddanser' ('The Tightrope Walker'). De Koörddanser has a list of spiritual and personal growth activities. Advertisers are required to have at least five years of experience after completing professional training. All activities should take place in a professional environment. The concept of ASC was not further delineated or operationalized by the researchers; those who advertised in De Koörddanser would qualify as participants in the sample. The participants were first approached with a letter explaining the purpose of the research, followed by a phone call a few days later. When an organization was approached, we asked for an instructor who actually gave the course. The response rate was 80%, suggesting eagerness on the part of the course instructors to participate.

A technique called "theoretical sampling" was applied, which means that the researchers strove for a maximum degree of heterogeneity within the sample. When no additional information could be collected from a particular type of course instructor, this type was not further selected (for example, a cap on yoga teachers after a few yoga teachers had already been interviewed). The sample consisted of 36 persons, which is adequate for deriving the different meaning models. Table I gives some characteristics of the sample. Some characteristics of the course participants are also given (based on estimations given by the course providers). The high degree of women participating in the courses and the high level of education of the course instructors are striking. Organization-wise, there was a large variety among the 36 courses. Six courses were given by multinational organizations. Five
organizations worked at the national level. 28 persons or organizations worked at the local level. Of the 36 course providers, 20 made their living from giving courses (56%). The rest either had other jobs or were volunteers. A few activities were on a donation basis, some on a non-profit basis, still others with a profit motive. On average 33 hours were spent per week on giving and preparing courses, with a standard deviation of 18 hours.

TABLE I: Description of the Sample (N=36) and the Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>variable</th>
<th>operationalization</th>
<th>course instructors</th>
<th>course participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gender</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>female</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>61%</td>
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<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>26-40 years</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>41-55 years</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&gt; 55 years</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>education</td>
<td>lower education</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>middle education</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>higher education</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data was collected using a structured interview with open questions. This method makes it possible to take the responses from the participants as a starting point. This is especially suited for teachers in ASCs, because these people as a rule adhere to holistic points of view and therefore dislike methods in which they have to compartmentalize themselves. All interviews were conducted by two researchers. The interview consisted of three parts. In the first part we attempted to get an impression of the contents of the course. In the second part we asked about the motives of the participants. Since we asked the course providers and not the participants themselves, these data need to be treated with caution (since participant motives were not our primary interest, we opted for this less labor-intensive approach). Nearly all course instructors state that general feelings of unhappiness, restlessness, not being at ease, and the feeling that something is lacking are motives for (at least some) people to take part in their course. A little over 60% of the instructors explicitly state that participants are searching for meaning and purpose in their life. This also suggests that although (as the reader will see later on) in every course potentially a meaningful perspective is offered, in nearly forty percent it is not explicitly asked for. Obviously, matching a meaning perspective or elements thereof with the needs
for meaning of a particular customer or client is highly individualized (van Lier, 1998).

In the third part of the interview, the course providers were asked how the five aspects of the Baumeister theory were given content in the course. As stated above, the question whether the market for ASCs can be conceived of as a market for meaning in life was not directly investigated. If course providers were fluently able to rephrase their course content in terms of Baumeister's needs, we considered our assumption to be correct. In general, course providers had no problems reformulating their course in terms of Baumeister's needs for meaning.

The answers to the open questions were categorized using a form of qualitative coding (Wester, 1987). After each interview the researchers reflected on possible categorizations of the answers. After all interviews were held the answers were independently categorized by each researcher. Phrases such as 'becoming conscious', 'wholeness', 'freedom', and 'happiness' were ignored by the authors, because these phrases were used by the majority of course providers and did not therefore discriminate between courses. Multiple answers could be given when translating the course in terms of Baumeister's needs for meaning, for example, a course can serve different goals. After detecting the categories that occurred with the highest frequencies, a second round of categorization was held in order to derive the meaning models. This was carried out by grouping these categories together in meaning models, with one category for each characteristic of Baumeister's theory. This was first done by the researchers, and then validated statistically by means of a factor analysis (reported in the full paper, available from the author). The meaning models will be presented in the next paragraph. After establishing the meaning models, the researchers independently classified the courses according to the dominant meaning model. The final classification of courses occurred by counting the number of characteristics a course had in common with a meaning model. Interrater reliability was .86 (Cohen's kappa, percentage agreement corrected for chance, running from 0 to 1).

Meaning Models In ASCs

In terms of meaning, the diversity of ASCs can be classified into four models. The first model, meditation, has as central premise that people have been conditioned wrongly. People strive for
pleasure and try to avoid pain. This may interfere with the actual situation, in which one often gets what one does not want and does not get what one does want. Meditation techniques are oriented to distance oneself from this daily struggle, and to develop more attention and appreciation for that-what-is. Similarly, meditation techniques focus attention on the here-and-now, and try to make the mind less distracted by daydreaming and current concerns. The second model, yoga, starts out with the idea that energy channels run through the body that can be more or less blocked. Yoga postures or exercises are directed towards unblocking these energy channels. This permits energy to run freely through the body, enabling optimal physical and psychological functioning. The third model, therapy, places a deepening interest in the self. The goal is to find out which parts of the self are truly authentic, and which inauthentic parts have been acquired by one's upbringing or by one's early experiences. In this manner the true self is discovered. In other words, the task is to integrate personal qualities that have been repressed through upbringing, experiences or societal mores. The last model, spiritual self, states that human beings have two selves: a human self and a spiritual self. The task is to let the lower (human) self go and to open ourselves for the (higher) spiritual self. According to this model, mankind is originally a spiritual being. However, through upbringing, culture and society, spiritual capacities have been repressed. As a consequence, people have lost the connection with their godlike essence and soul. By re-establishing contact with the spiritual capacities, a connection with a larger whole is made. The full paper, available from the author, gives a table in which each of these characteristics are directly related to Baumeister's needs for meaning.

One course shared very few characteristics with models described above, and has its own meaning model, which we have called release. Here, the context is that emotions that have not been expressed create unhealthy effects by being stored in the body. The goal is to release emotions by all means of expressions. This is worthwhile for the participants, as it feels good to release oneself of these feelings, creating an experience of flow. Self-worth is increased as previously repressed emotions are integrated and made part of the self. We will not further discuss this model as it is based on just one interview.

The meaning models thus derived are ideal types that generally do not exclude each other and
in practice are used concurrently. For example, some meditation courses are directed towards opening up for the "Buddha nature", so both the models meditation and spiritual self are involved. In our sample 10 courses use only 1 model, 17 courses use elements of 2 models, 8 courses use elements of 3 models, and 1 course even mixes all four models. As stated, courses have been categorized by their dominant model, based on the number of elements of Baumeister's theory it has in common.

CONCLUSION

We have started out with the proposition that meaning in life is more and more provided in the market. Several of these (sub)markets exist in which different meaning models operate. We now return to the goal that we have originally formulated for this paper, to assist a would-be provider on the market for meaning in life in shaping his product or service proposition. Baumeister's theory of needs for meaning was useful for describing the variety of ASCs in terms of a limited number of meaning models. We suggest that Baumeister's framework may serve as a practical tool for creating propositions for all submarkets of the market for meaning in life. Providers can imitate by following established meaning models. Innovation can be achieved by introducing new meaning models, but also by creating a new ordering of the elements of the existing models.

We conclude by giving a few suggestions. Emphasizing the element of context might be especially useful on the market for meaning in life. Travel agencies can offer holidays in which people do voluntary work in developing countries, for example in an orphanage. On the labor market jobs can be advertised with explicit reference to the wider societal goals to which the job contributes. Someone could start a temp agency that sends people to meaningful jobs only. On the marriage market, dating agencies can emphasize the idea that having a partner gives something to live for outside oneself. Nature reserves can emphasize the experience of reunion with nature as a side product of doing walks and hikes. On the other hand, on the charity market the component of context is often inherent and the component of efficacy is especially important. Donors want to be sure that their gift actually benefits the intended recipients and is not just used for paying the direct mail organizations and the salaries of the staff.
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