

Zero-dollar Marketing: Learnt Attributes Based On The Success of Tesla

Mahinthorn Pothiwan ¹

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Abstract

This research aims to create the first-of-its-kind understanding of zero-dollar marketing as a novelty concept and decipher its attributes for practitioners and scholars for their consideration of this emerging concept based on the learnings from Tesla as the successful case study of the marketing technique. Case study-based Thematic Analysis is utilised to collect, classify, and analyse qualitative data collected from interviewed experts in order to decipher zero-dollar marketing attributes for wider comprehension and further theoretical development. In this research, given the novelty of the marketing technique, we propose the definition of zero-dollar marketing for further theoretical development going forward. The outcome of this investigation displays that there are four vital attributes to zero-dollar marketing, namely (1) personal branding of key figures, (2) clear-cut product differentiation and consumer orientation, (3) words of mouth and buzz marketing, and (4) the ‘chance’ factor.

Keywords: Zero-dollar marketing, \$0 marketing, Multi-Channel Marketing Strategy, Unique Selling Proposition, Branding

Introduction

In today's context, marketing has become more forefront in creating awareness, interests, and desires from target group, which if with success can bring about actions of purchases. Marketing is now adopted as a method to inspire the personality of the business, creation of trust, and customer retention efforts (Hackley and Tiwsakul 2006). Regardless of its position of importance today, marketing has long existed in the days of yore, retrieving the history back to the seventh century BCE in what is now known as “Turkey” when the advent of trade came to realisation as a

¹ Rajabhat Mahasarakham University, E-mail : mahinthorn_pothiwan@internet.ru

method to encourage sales of goods and barter trading though did it contradict the ancient teachings of unity, altruism, and cooperation. Marketing, as we can recognise as a factor of economic drivers, is derived from late 1800s though largely introduced as the methods of “the distribution of goods”, economics and consumption with no further scientific implication behind it (Shaw and Jones 2005). From the 1960s, marketing is viewed as a method of differentiation, where scholar and practitioners view marketing as a method to bring about uniqueness in their offerings in comparison to competing rivals offering goods of similarity (Keener 1960). Thus, the advent of the marketing mix theory by Borden (Borden 1984) came to realisation, with the focus to enable practitioners to view marketing as a strategy delivered to create unique product offerings and product-oriented unique selling price (Constantinides 2006). By the late 1990s through 2000s, core principles of marketing would be reconsidered from the perspectives of users, customers, and consumers due to the fragmentation of markets and the target marketing becoming more individualistic and expressive, which creates a number of unique wants and needs of the target group regardless of the same market they belong to (Lauterborn 1990).

Presently, marketing has been re-strategized as a method of “delivering the total experience to users, customers, and consumer”, signalling the farther emphasis that brands are alive and thought to have individualistic personality to create certain appeals in a market of fragmented needs. Thus, in today’s age, the experience of the target group is heavily emphasised. The advent of this novel school of thought is also marked by the integration of social media and technological advancement to deliver on unique experience and brand exposures, referring to the fact that interactions are expanded to be between a larger number of actors in the market – surrounding societies, opinion leaders, interactions with brands and current/past customers of the brands, and brand evangelists (Kotler, Kartajaya and Setiawan 2016). This gives rises to new concepts and re-emphasises existing concepts: word-of-mouth marketing, internal branding, social listening (Babatope and Ogunshakin 2020), and personal branding (Kucharska 2019). Recently, zero-dollar marketing (stylised as \$0 marketing) has been coined as a concept of novelty as a method utilised by an electric vehicle manufacturer – Tesla – to enable the success by becoming the most valuable

company in the world presently (Kluger 2021); however, without sparing any spending on marketing, advertising, and promotion; thus, has taken full potentials of zero-dollar marketing (Melton 2018). This research investigates the concept of zero-dollar marketing as a concept of novelty and deciphers its attributes for practitioners and scholars for their consideration in the comprehension of zero-dollar marketing as an emerging concept of novelty, enabling the further construction and exploration into the subject matter.

Literature Reviews of Zero-Dollar Marketing

The concept of zero-dollar marketing was first coined by J. Carr in 2004 when it was used to describe the beneficial partnership between the University of California San Diego (UCSD) and the National University of Singapore (NUS), where the shared goals are emphasised to deliver a successful curriculum in biotechnology education, along with other factors to lead a successful collaboration. This brings about the strengthening of brands between the two universities with increase student intake through the expansion of target audience to deliver education to “without spending marketing funds”. Based on this case, it can be interpreted that the success of the partnership relies on the marketing of the curriculum of the two universities, which are utilised to strengthen their reputation, innovation, collaboration, and market expansion to reach more students in Asia in the case of UCSD and in the United States whilst working collaboratively to strengthen core competencies in curriculum development and research competencies in the perspective of NUS. From this, both universities enjoy the success of the marketing effort stemmed from the strengthening brand image and trust building (Carr 2004).

Regardless, the concept would not be further developed until 2017, under which the name was re-introduced as “zero-budget marketing”. Kaya (2017) discusses methods utilised for the promotion of a social responsibility project titled “Can Kid” occurred in Turkey. In this study, it can be appreciated that the exploitation of social media has been able to bring about increased awareness in regard to the project, as well as the collaboration between multiple parties to bring success to the project. This urged the public to respond positively through words of mouth and buzz marketing; let

alone, the reliance on digital platforms as a reach-out method to wider audience. Afterwards, the interest in the conceptual development has once again evaporated and then re-emerged to the surface in the year 2022 reintroduced with the case study of Tesla Motor. Agarwal and Bangeja (2022) introduce the concept of “zero-dollar marketing” based on the case study of Tesla. It is discovered that the company refutes the spending on marketing, advertising, and promotion, citing the views of its management consideration of such decision to be “misappropriating resources”; thus, relying fully on the use of zero-marketing strategies, including the reliance on social media through the strong personal brand of its chief executive officer (CEO) – Elon Musk – to attract the target group given his charismatic presence and the ability to influence opinions on social media platforms. Due to the strength of his personal brand, the target group considers him as Tesla itself; thus, his becoming a public relations effort and the face of the company. In addition, creating the ‘buzz’ is one of the core strengths of Tesla, establishing ‘excitements’ to the automotive industry by introducing vehicles of interesting capabilities and concepts, public relation stunts, and the hosting of its own events to introduce its vehicles to the public. This then drives awareness and interests of the brand to the target group and farther beyond. Target groups are also exposed to buzz marketing and word-of-mouth contents in relation to its vehicles online to create interest and desire for its vehicles.

Zhou (2023) mentions that the success of Tesla Motors can be attributed to its ability to adapt and change with time and the strong technological and digital usage in assisting its sales and promotion; let alone, innovation ‘like no others’ as the unique selling propositions in comparison to its rivals. Liang (2022) further insists that the success of Tesla can be accounted for its reliance and understanding of human-centred designs and innovation, as evidenced by on-board innovations and advancements on its vehicles and the purchasing processes, which also aids the brand through buzz marketing and spread words of mouth on social media by its target group. In addition, the company offers a level of product customisation to customers as a method to encourage sales. Zhou (2023), Liang (2022), and Agarwal and Bangeja (2022) mention that due to the rising concerns about the environment, the success of Tesla stems from its pushes towards becoming the worthy successor to traditional

vehicles; let alone; the support from governments of various countries to create appeals for electric vehicles through various demand-induced policies and necessary facilities to support the operation of electrical fleet in their respective countries (Potiwan et al. 2022).

Research Objectives

1. To create a good comprehension regarding the extent of the success of Tesla as a result of its zero-dollar marketing strategy.
2. To decipher learnt successful attributes and factors from the case of Tesla in regard to the utilization of zero-dollar marketing as a strategy.
3. To provide as the stepping stones for further research attempts into zero-dollar marketing as a concept of novelty.

Research Methodology

This research into the new concept of zero-dollar marketing undertakes the qualitative approach to derive relevant components to drive the success of such a strategy through the Thematic Analysis method (Kiger and Varpio 2020), given the limitations of data and research outputs on the subject matter. Firstly, experts in the fields of zero-dollar marketing strategy, including those whose previous works related to the case of Tesla and Elon Musk's influences on Tesla's success, brand strategy analyses, and researchers who have previously studied the marketing strategy employed by Tesla, are interviewed to garner information regarding zero-dollar marketing and its attributes. This is attempted to gather expert opinions in the subject matter, given its novelty as a marketing strategy and its limitation of usage by Tesla as of current and utilising the search keyword sets displayed in *Table 1*. From the aforementioned step, the successive step includes the categorisation of information based on emerging attributes and subcategorised factors subsequently. The analysis and discussion of data and expert opinions to identify attributes of zero-dollar marketing strategy then follow suit. Afterwards, key findings are summarised in order to derive vital attributes for practitioners and academicians for future usage in theoretical exploration and theoretical development in relation to zero-dollar marketing as a concept of novelty.

Table 1: keyword sets utilised in search for consulting experts in the subject matter

Keyword Set 1	“Zero-dollar Marketing” “\$0 Marketing”
Keyword Set 2	Tesla ~Marketing
Keyword Set 3	Elon Musk-branding Marketing

Based on the search for experts in the subject matter, thirteen (13) experts are identified and selected based on their previous work and expertise on the topic, academically or practically, in relation of zero-dollar marketing, Tesla, and the influence of Elon Musk on Tesla's success, with whom we reach out to contact and

inquire to be interviewed via e-mail. However, only five (5) of the contacted experts agree to be interviewed via their selected methods of convenience, either via e-mail, online tele-conferencing platforms, or LinkedIn. Their profiles and methods of interviewed are displayed in *Table 2*. In addition, their wishes to remain anonymous are respected and applied throughout the preparation of the manuscript. Given the limitations and the novelty in the exploration of concept of zero-dollar marketing, we take the case study-based approach to enable the learnings and initial understanding of the emerging themes of relevant factors that constitute zero-dollar marketing as a strategy; let alone, the limitation in examples of companies pursuing the approach; thus, justifying the use of the case study on Tesla in our analysis and discussion. Each factor is generalised to enable learnings for the wider usage and comprehension.

Table 2: Profile of experts who agree to the interview regarding the subject matter

Data of consulted experts	Occupation	Area of Activity	Selected Interview Methods
Expert I: Previously worked on Elon Musk and the success of Tesla Motor	Brand Strategist	Indian Subcontinent	E-mail only
Expert II: Previously worked on Zero-dollar marketing and the success of Tesla	Academician	Indian Subcontinent	Online tele-conferencing and e-mail
Expert III: Previously worked the cult of personality of Elon Musk	Corporate Strategist	North America	E-mail and LinkedIn
Expert IV:	Academician	Oriental Asia	Online tele-

Previously worked on the Marketing Strategy employed by Tesla			conferencing only
Expert V: Previously worked on Tesla Motor's performance during the outbreak of COVID-19 and its success	Academician	North America	E-mail only

Findings and Discussions

This section discusses the categorisation and analysis of data garnered from expert opinions to attributes of zero-dollar marketing as a marketing strategy. In defining the terminology, given that no previous authors have derived a clear-cut definition for zero-dollar marketing, three in five experts term zero-dollar market as “the method utilised in the promotion of products with the reliance largely on external factors, which include, but not limited to, the market, consumer trends, and unique selling points.” The remaining two experts phrase the terminology as “a combination of multi-channel marketing strategies in order to promote internal capabilities through the reliance on word-of-mouth marketing and buzz marketing”. Additionally, two of the interviewed experts mention “taking advantage of the strong brand name” and “charismatic charm/brands of key figures” in their definitions, in this case phrased as ‘internal capabilities’. “External factors”, according to all five experts, refers to uncontrollable attributes, such as consumer trends, market reaction to products, interests and desires, buzz creation, and “the bit that has to do with luck”. Thus, to derive the appropriate definition based on the definitions and relevant attribute of zero-dollar marketing as mutually agreed by all interviewed experts, we propose the following definition for zero-dollar marketing: “an informed strategy of promotional activities, leveraging on both internal capabilities of a business in the creation of brand-related or product-related appeals and uncontrolled external attributing factors in deriving organic interests, desires and widespread word-of-mouth.

Having collected information and expert opinions from the interviews, four emerging attributes can be visualised and developed into a conceptual framework to aid the initial comprehension of the workings behind zero-dollar marketing". In addition, we categorise vital attributes into four (4) factors based on expert opinions as shown below.



Illustration 1: Zero-dollar marketing attributes produced from our investigation

1. Personal Branding of Key Figures

One of the attributes of zero-dollar marketing is due to the strong personal branding of vital key figures of the business. This is comparable to the case of Tesla's success being partially attributed to the personal branding of Elon Musk - its CEO. It is mentioned by experts that the brand is successful from the fact that the CEO creates certain appeals in the eyes of the target group as he inspires "confidence, trust, future vision, and the X-factor". Indeed it is believed to have stemmed from his X factor stems from his authenticity with his "story" and commitment to help solve global issues, and connects it to the overall brand value to the extent that both brands would noticeably be identified as one connected brand. This then helps Musk to channel his vision, mission, and values through the branding of Tesla, whilst the public visualise Tesla as Musk himself and vice versa. In addition, Musk keeps the target group of the brand engaged through series of engagements with the target group on various topics on social media platforms, especially Twitter as recounted by one of the experts below. Through these interactions, he is able to keep the public informed about the

company, electric vehicles, and various topics. In fact, all five experts admit that he keeps up with and makes fun of the current events to garner attention from the wider public. In addition, the cult of personality created by Musk as “a visionary futurist who cares for the environment and the betterment of the human race” has rendered him an advantage over other CEOs of other companies who are seen as “slave drivers in the capitalistic world”; thus, resulting in his being viewed as a benevolent corporate leader. Through this he is able to further his dialogues regarding electric vehicle technology, sustainability, computer engineering, and futurism, which indeed drives positive image for Tesla and the utilisation of such goodwill to create appeal for the brand itself. According to one expert, this is not a novelty, as the success of Tesla in personality branding of its key figure had once occurred to Apple when Steve Jobs was the CEO, painting the innovative and high-quality image of the iPhone and iPad product lines resulting in similar phenomenon.

Through the personal branding of the key figures, we can deduce that one of the attributing factor for the enabling of zero-dollar marketing is the personal branding of key figures of the business is sufficiently strong and connected to the overall brand, channelling a connection between the key figures with the brand; thus, implanting their personality, philosophy, and values into the products. This ascertains the projection of such value to the target group, creating certain appeals to the buyers who would be interested in such products as well as brand stories and/or philosophy; thus, creating desires to own such products. It can be seen that this would enable the workings of zero-dollar marketing as the target group of consumers is inspired and motivated by the key figures; therefore, purchasing products from the brands based on the influence of the key figures, whose identities are associated with certain appeals to the products, making the brand and its offerings become a unique selling proposition attached to the brand itself.

2. Clear-cut Product Differentiation and Consumer Orientation

From the interview, it is brought up that the success of zero-dollar marketing has been based on its unique selling propositions and its customer orientation. This can be demonstrated through Tesla Motor positioning itself as “the maker of future-

oriented vehicles of today”, referring to its offerings which are available upon the purchase which are not currently being carried out and applied in traditional vehicles, such as live car talk, online remote consultation and other over-the-air services to protect consumers' needs, such as car purchase, after-sales and vehicle charging. In addition, as a promotional method, Tesla Motor has invested heavily in the expansion of charging points to encourage interest and desires for their products and enabling the practicality of electric vehicle usage for the expansion of sales.

In addition, the offerings of Tesla's vehicles are the main value propositions amongst other aspects, which are a novelty and differ greatly from traditional vehicles, including futuristic interiors, on-board technologies, and safety features, which are not found on other car manufacturers of the same period of production. This, coupled with the fact that Tesla is the first company to have been successful in the commercialisation of electric vehicles have made its products and offerings distinctive and unique, establishing itself as the alternative to ‘gas-guzzling past’ and the benchmark for electric vehicle producers entering the market later on. Based on the analysis of all experts, it can be visualised that Tesla comprehends the needs to be consumer oriented. This is demonstrated by its research and development in vehicle functionalisation – zero-emission vehicles and on-board technologies - to be expected from high-end luxury vehicles. In addition, it can be understood that Tesla, as a unique selling proposition, develops multiple offerings to customers, such as interior adaptations, sunroofs, and vehicle paints to create further appeal for customers, enabling customers to customise their vehicles to better suit their needs and wants. In addition, the company identifies one of the pitfalls of vehicle purchases, non-upgradability nature of traditional vehicles, and introduces software upgrades on air to ascertain that its customers receive the best driving experience and the latest software for vehicle running as could be. As a result, a number of unique selling propositions are created for Tesla Motor through the understanding of the needs and wants of its market and delivering on their satisfaction. Furthermore, their sales channels have been adapted to suit the ‘changing times’ through the enabling of online purchases for vehicles and features to aid customers in selected ‘their cars’ better – all through its

website and online sales channel, which is thought of to be one of the successful strategies of Tesla Motor.

Through this, it can be deduced that in order to achieve success in zero-dollar marketing, the business is highly encouraged to create products which are unique in the market and are difficult to replicate by rivals of the same industry. It can be understood that through product differentiation, market positioning can occur in the minds of consumers in regard to the types of products, its uniqueness, and its value propositions. In addition, businesses are to create products from the point of view of its end users with deep understanding, in addition to identifying the ‘blind spots’ to be filled in the market, assisting in the success of a product launch and the creation of customer satisfaction for businesses. Distribution channels must be catered to the target group and suit to their needs and wants, eliminating the concerns and doubts in the purchases of products.

3. Words of Mouth and Buzz Marketing

Tesla Motor relies heavily on the creation of word-of-mouth and buzz marketing. It can be visualised that since Tesla reached commercialisation, their reliance on word-of-mouth marketing can be noticed through conversations of the general generated about its innovation and as ‘a new breath of fresh air’ into the automotive industry. This then creates interests and desires for the products not only from car enthusiasts but also technological savvies and environmentalists, which then leads to the widespread word-of-mouth contents on digital platforms. Also, the leverage of opinion leaders can be noticed from various groups to review ‘these new, weird, environmentally friendly, futuristic-looking cars’ to their respective social circles, under which interests in electric vehicles and Tesla exponentially grow. The company utilises their software updating capabilities to feature the latest technologies available, which are then rolled out to the end users and create further interest to the end users and potential purchasers. This then triggers a noticeably larger group of the public to become more interest and develop desires for electric vehicles and Tesla vehicles. Moreover, words of mouth are furthered through social media as more end users review their opinions and features of their Tesla vehicles to the wider audience, leading

to Tesla's becoming the benchmark of electric vehicles, its becoming the most innovative companies in the world, and its strong position in the minds of consumers of various group as 'new, quirky, environmentally friendly, futuristic cars'.

Another contributing factor dwells on the respect the public have for, 'expert opinions', and the x-factor of Elon Musk in regard to electric vehicle technologies. Through this, Musk realises the expertise power to be had in the space; thus, exploiting the advantage to promote Tesla and announce news and notices in regard to the running of the company, and the announcements of new products and vehicle-related technological updates; let alone, his engagement with the general public on social media in various topics. Through the method, Musk drives up interests in his personal brand from the general public, which then becomes a spill-over to Tesla Motor. This leads to the generation of buzz and widespread words of mouth through social media, which then leads to the building up of interest in Tesla Motor creating excitement for the brand and drawing interests of various groups.

It can be interpreted that the creation of buzz and the generation of words of mouth are vital in achieving the gist of zero-dollar marketing, given that the promotion and advertising of products are generated through the interests and desires of the targeted audience. In the case, it can be learned that the creation of buzz and words of mouth can occur in various forms. Nevertheless, the core capabilities and unique selling propositions of the business must be showcased to the target group and the general public, who would interact with the larger audience and thus, publicising products and the businesses at no charge with reactions, interests, and desires of genuine. In addition, the x-factor and certain types of power possessed by the key figures of the businesses can also be utilised to inspire the target group and the general public; thus, must be exhausted for product promotion. However, an expert recommends that prior to the achievement of the mentioned, a strong personal branding must be attempted and reinforced to channel the spill-over effects onto products and the businesses.

4. *The “Chance” Factor*

The majority of the interviewed experts mention that another attributing factor is Tesla Motor’s ability in understanding the problems that are of global concerns – global warming and the building-up of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, causing the human race to search for appropriate alternative modes of transportation and methods to reduce the carbon footprint. The company then dwells on such themes in an effort to promote its products; thus, being able to connect better with environmentalist groups and the general public in comparison to traditional vehicle manufacturers as global warming concerns are mounting up. It is remarked that through the reaching out to the mentioned group, the impact to be receive by the end users of Tesla Motor can be immense, given the referent power to influence their followers who then can reach out to spread the buzz and reach typical consumers. The attributing factor to Tesla’s success stems from the support, promotion, and encouragement for electric vehicle usage by a large number of governments across the globe. In a number of countries in North America, large parts of Europe, and a number of parts throughout Asia, charging network and other supporting facilities are being provided to encourage the needs and wants directly from the demand side; let alone, the provision of subsidies and tax reduction for electric vehicle purchasers. This plays a part in the reduction of ownership and maintenance costs for purchasers; let alone, more affordable electric vehicles through the reduction of corporate taxation rates and import taxation rates for electric vehicle automakers; hence, being able to price more affordably and more competitively against traditional vehicles. This, coupled with the products offered by Tesla Motor, further creates appeals for electric car ownership for the general public, as recounted:

We can deduce that the “chance” factor can have considerable impact on the marketing and promotion of a business and its products. This includes a number of uncontrollable factors enforced by external parties, such as the global themes and government cooperation. Indeed, this attribute is complex to advent given its uncontrollable nature and its difficulty in the prediction of such advents. Thus, businesses and marketers must be on a look-out for such attributes and the

comprehension of global trends and concerns in order to take advantage of the attribute. An expert suggests that once the precedence is able to be taken advantage, a careful implementation of multi-channel marketing strategy to generate the buzz and words of mouth must be put in place, coupled with the promotion of unique selling point and the deep understanding of wants and needs of the target in order to leverage the attribute effectively.

Conclusions and Ways Forward

This research is tasked to create the initial comprehension of zero-dollar marketing and decipher its attributes for practitioners and scholars for their consideration in the understanding of zero-dollar marketing as an emerging concept, enabling the further construction and exploration into the subject matter. We consider this investigation as an initial point into zero-dollar marketing, requiring further construction and exploration, calling on practitioners and scholars to wage their consideration towards the subject matter. Regarding the outcome from our investigation, four (4) attributing factors are derived. Firstly, the strong connection between the corporate branding and personal branding of key figures must be established to enable the connection of value and philosophy into products, creating interest and inspiring customers with a compelling purchase rationale. Product differentiation showcases sustainable unique selling propositions and core capabilities. Customer orientation must be taken into consideration to ascertain target group's demand delivery and noticing the 'blind spots' in the market to deliver on the demand of the target group. The use of word-of-mouth and buzz marketing is vital to create interest and desires for the target group, which can be carried out in various methods, such as core capabilities, unique selling propositions, and the charismatic factor of key figures. Right timing and chance is of essential in the formulation of zero-dollar marketing due to its ability to support the growing sales and promotion of the business.

In this research, we provision the first foothold into zero-dollar marketing to enable further exploration in subject matter going forward. Given its nature as a qualitative nature, the factors are observed and categorised based on expert opinions

only; thus, meeting its shortcoming as its inability in quantify the relevance of the investigated attributes in zero-dollar marketing strategy formulation. It is believed that forward research and investigations into the subject matter are suggested to verify and clarify the aforementioned factors to comprehend the effectiveness of the attributes or develop the theoretical stake farther into the subject matter or critique the outcomes of this investigation with new evidence and findings through undertaking more research into other companies which may practise zero-dollar marketing, as we were able to afford Tesla as a case study given the limitations of data. Hence, we call on researchers to take action in furthering the stake of zero-dollar marketing going forward.

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