GUIDE

Adaptive Marketing: Research and History

This page exists to make a false claim impossible. The term has a history, it belongs to other people, and the contribution made here is specific and smaller than inventing it.

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The claim this page prevents

Marketing Helix did not invent Adaptive Marketing. Mike Millett did not coin it. Digilu did not create it. It was not invented in 2026. Any of those statements would be false, and a reference site that makes a false attribution about its own subject has forfeited the only thing it was building.

The term has prior academic and industry history, set out below. What follows is what is documented, what is contested, and what this site adds.

Prior academic use

The clearest anchor is *Closing the Marketing Capabilities Gap*, Day, G. S., *Journal of Marketing*, 2011. Day argued that market complexity had outrun the marketing capabilities of firms, and named three capabilities that close the gap: vigilant market learning, adaptive market experimentation, and open marketing. This is where *adaptive marketing capabilities* enters the literature as a construct.

The construct was then tested and refined. Guo and colleagues (2018, *Journal of Business Research*) separated static, dynamic, and adaptive marketing capabilities and examined them against environmental turbulence in B2B firms. Reimann, Carvalho, and Duarte (2022, *Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing*) examined adaptive marketing capabilities alongside market orientation and international performance, with competitive intensity as a moderating condition.

Behind all of it sits an older idea: that a firm's ability to sense and respond to its market is itself a source of advantage. That lineage runs through the market orientation and organizational learning literatures and is considerably older than the phrase.

The capabilities page treats this literature in detail.

The digital and real-time lineage

Separately from the academic thread, the practitioner conversation arrived at similar language through a different route. As execution moved to channels that could be changed daily, the practical question stopped being how to plan a year and became how to decide what to change this week. Real-time marketing, agile marketing, growth practice, and continuous optimization all emerged from that pressure.

These are not the same idea and they are frequently used as though they were. Real-time marketing is an operating mode. Agile marketing is a way of organizing work. Continuous optimization improves an existing answer. Adaptive Marketing is the broader claim that the answer itself has to keep being re-examined against a moving environment. The nomenclature map separates all of them.

Current practitioner definitions

Contemporary industry definitions of adaptive marketing vary widely, and the variation is itself informative. Some treat it as personalization at scale, some as real-time responsiveness, some as agile marketing under another name, and some as a description of using data to adjust campaigns. Several are effectively product descriptions written around whatever the publisher sells.

This site does not attempt to adjudicate between them, and it does not attack them. It states its own definition, states the boundaries, and marks clearly which terms are ours to use and which belong to others. Where a widely used definition differs from the one here, the difference is usually about scope: whether adaptation includes strategy and evidence, or only delivery.

What The Marketing Helix contributes

Not the term. The connection.

The academic work explains what an organization must be *able* to do. It does not explain why alignment decays in the first place, and without that, adaptation looks like a response to competitive pressure rather than a response to something structural.

The Marketing Helix supplies the structural account. Customers are already in motion: readiness, trust, and consideration change continuously and largely independently of brand action. Alignment between a message and a customer requires trust, relevance, and timing to be simultaneously present. It follows that **alignment is temporary by nature rather than by fault**, and that marketing which does not adapt will drift out of alignment without ever becoming wrong.

That reframing has a practical consequence, which is the actual contribution. A declining campaign stops being evidence that the work was bad and becomes evidence that a condition moved. Teams argue differently once that is accepted, and they argue about the market instead of about each other.

The second contribution is nomenclature. The terms in this area are used inconsistently enough that two people can agree completely and believe they disagree. Organizing the vocabulary, stating which terms we use and which are somebody else's, and saying plainly what each is not, is useful work that does not require having invented anything.

What is not claimed

- That Marketing Helix, Digilu, or Mike Millett invented Adaptive Marketing, or the phrase.
- That the academic literature supports any claim about a specific commercial method.
- That adaptive marketing capabilities and Adaptive Marketing are the same construct.
- That any figure, ranking, or performance result appears here without a source.

The separate discipline of Adaptive Brand Management is set out in its own paper, with its own provenance and version history. Its origin claims are made there and are not restated here.

Sources

References

1. Day, G. S. (2011). *Closing the Marketing Capabilities Gap*. *Journal of Marketing*, Volume 75, Issue 4, pages 183 to 195. doi:10.1509/jmkg.75.4.183
2. Guo, H., Xu, H., Tang, C., Liu-Thompkins, Y., Guo, Z., and Dong, B. (2018). *Comparing the impact of different marketing capabilities: Empirical evidence from B2B firms in China*. *Journal of Business Research*, Volume 93, pages 79 to 89. doi:10.1016/j.jbusres.2018.04.010
3. Reimann, C. K., Carvalho, F. M. P. de O., and Duarte, M. P. (2022). *Adaptive marketing capabilities, market orientation, and international performance: the moderation effect of competitive intensity*. *Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing*, Volume 37, Issue 12, pages 2533 to 2543. doi:10.1108/JBIM-08-2021-0391

Verified against Crossref on 2026-08-21. Where a secondary source and the publisher record disagreed, the publisher record was used.

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A customer behavior model describing how a customer in motion gives a message attention, and how trust, relevance, and timing then shape whether it draws closer, drifts away, or returns.