

Theodore Levitt, 81, Who Coined the Term 'Globalization', Is Dead

By Barnaby J. Feder

July 6, 2006

Correction Appended

Theodore Levitt, a former professor at the Harvard Business School credited with coining the term "globalization" and with championing the undervalued role of marketing in defining what businesses should make and sell, died June 28 at his home in Belmont, Mass. He was 81.

The cause was prostate cancer, according to his son, Peter.

Mr. Levitt, known as Ted, gained widespread attention for his marketing insights in 1960, the year after he joined the Harvard faculty. He published an article called "Marketing Myopia" in *The Harvard Business Review* that criticized business executives for too narrowly defining what their companies did. He argued, for instance, that the railroad industry had lost customers to the airlines, trucking and auto industries in part because its top executives thought they were in the business of running trains instead of providing transportation.

More than 1,000 companies ordered 35,000 reprints in the weeks after publication, a total that has since risen to 850,000 reprints, according to *The Harvard Business Review*.

His concept that business was becoming globalized, which Mr. Levitt defined as the changes in technology and social behaviors that allow multinational companies like Coca-Cola and McDonald's to sell the same products worldwide, first appeared in a 1983 *Harvard Business Review* article "The Globalization of Markets." In his sweeping style, he said, "Gone are accustomed differences in national or regional preferences."

Although unapologetic about exaggerating, Mr. Levitt would readily concede that companies actually had to balance persistent national cultural patterns with the general trend toward the embrace of global brands. Thus, he approved tactics like McDonald's supplementing its standard menus with local fare like vegan meals in India.

Mr. Levitt's zest for intellectual combat reflected his view of writing as an extension of his Harvard classroom, which he prowled as he lectured, occasionally tossing chalk for emphasis. "His technique in class was to be provocative to get you to think," said Michael

Berolzheimer, a former student, who credited a strategy session with Mr. Levitt as the roots of his company's successful marketing of DuraFlame fireplace logs.

In addition to writing eight marketing books and frequently consulting, Mr. Levitt was also editor of The Harvard Business Review from 1985 to 1990. Under his direction, the review began running shorter articles and cartoons in addition to its longer analytical articles and "how to" reviews of management practices.

Theodore Levitt was born March 1, 1925, in Vollmerz, Germany. His father, Boris, a cobbler, and his wife, Rachel, moved the family to Dayton, Ohio, a decade later. Mr. Levitt and Erma Fiste, who became the syndicated humor columnist Erma Bombeck, founded a newspaper together as fifth graders. Mr. Levitt was drafted into the Army before graduating and served in Europe during World War II.

After the war, he worked as a sports writer for The Dayton Journal Herald, completed high school through a correspondence course, then enrolled at Antioch College, graduating in 1949. He earned his Ph.D. in economics from Ohio State University in 1951. He taught at the University of North Dakota and worked as an oil industry consultant in Chicago before moving to Harvard in 1959.

Mr. Levitt is survived by his wife of 58 years, the former Joan Levy; two sons, Peter, of Boston, and John, of Sarasota, Fla.; two daughters, Kathryn Wells, of Lexington, Mass., and Laura Levitt Beaudry, of Belmont, Mass.; six grandchildren; and two sisters, Ann Brenner, of Winston-Salem, N.C., and Dorothy Engelhardt, of Dayton, Ohio. A daughter, Frances Levitt Byington, and a brother, Albert, died before him.