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Book Review of *No Contest: The Case Against Competition*
By Alfie Kohn
Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986

By J. Scott Armstrong

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Many marketing people accept competition as a desirable and effective way to improve performance. Is there any scientific support for this viewpoint?

Marketing managers often try to promote competition among their salespeople by offering incentives to the best performer. Marketing professors use competitive reward structures to motivate people to learn. Marketing planners develop strategies to defeat their competitors as a way to ensure their company's success.

Advice to marketing people on how to fight the competitive struggle can be found in books with titles such as *Battling for Profits: How to Win on the Marketing Battlefield* (Hendon 1986). Even standard texts, such as Kotler's (1984*) Marketing Management*, devote considerable attention to marketing as a type of warfare (Chapter 12). However, I had not been aware of any empirical work that explicitly examined the value of competition in marketing. Kotler's Chapter 12 does not cite any empirical support.

Marketing theory differs from economic theory on the issue of competition. The economic theory of the firm is based on profit maximization. The competitive model in marketing advocates such objectives as maximizing market share and performing better than competitors. There is no theoretical reason to believe that approaches based on competition would maximize profit in the long run. In other words, maximizing market share is not equivalent to maximizing profit.

If the competitive model lacks empirical and theoretical support, why is it so widely accepted? Perhaps, as Kohn suggests in *No Contest*, the reason is that the competitive model is so widespread in our society. We judge ourselves in relation to others. We feel good when our competitors fail.

Kohn's *No Contest* reviews empirical research on competition. In fact, much work has been done to determine whether competition is better than cooperation and some work has compared competition with doing the best for oneself. The research comes from many fields, but primarily from education, sports, the performing arts, and psychology. The results have been consistent, clear-cut, and surprising: competition typically results in less creativity, poorer performance, and reduced satisfaction.

Certainly one would expect competition to be more effective under some circumstances. It is surprising to learn how difficult it was to find empirical evidence about situations in which competition proved superior, especially when one looks at the range of evidence examined by Kohn. His chapter titles indicate this range: Chapters 2 through 5 ask "Is Competition Inevitable?," "Is Competition More Productive?," "Is Competition More Enjoyable?," and "Does Competition Build Character?"

Kohn has assembled an impressive amount of research. The book contains 388 references, more than half of them to books. The research described is varied and interesting. For example, the Japanese encourage more cooperation in schools and businesses than Americans do. Another example is drawn from a meta-analysis of educational studies; the conclusion was that learning is achieved more effectively in a cooperative than in a competitive environment.

Though I am not aware of evidence to refute Kohn's conclusions, one might question whether he presents an unbiased viewpoint. Might he have overlooked or misinterpreted evidence that contradicts his viewpoint? Unfortunately, he does not describe the procedures used to conduct the literature review, nor does he demonstrate the validity of his interpretations of the studies. Nevertheless, Kohn's interpretations are generally in agreement with my own interpretation for the few studies of which I had already been aware. One exception – a minor point in

Kohn's analysis—is his use of Watson's Little Albert study on conditioning from the 1920s. This study was discredited some years ago (Samelson 1980 summarizes the history of this case).

To test the accuracy of *No Contest* in a more systematic way, I examined whether the references were correct. Errors in citation are a problem identified long ago (Shull 1931) that persists in research to this day. For example, Eichorn and Yankauer (1987), in a study of three public health journals, found that 31% of the 150 references contained citation errors (punctuation errors were not included) and 30% contained interpretation errors. A convenience sample of 14 studies was selected from Kohn's book. They were selected because they were of interest to me and because I had not previously read them. No errors were found in the citations. Aided by a research assistant,[1] I then examined the interpretations for the 14 studies. Two of the studies could not be found through the book's index. An examination of the remaining 12 studies revealed an incorrect quotation on page 157 (footnote 86) from an article by Johnson, Johnson, and Tiffany (1984). This error was minor, but it tended to put cooperation in a more favorable light. A more serious error was noted in the interpretation of results from Johnson et al. (1984) on page 151. Kohn reported the result to be that competition produced a less positive regard for people of different ethnic backgrounds. We reached the opposite interpretation. A third error was found on page 108 (at footnote 22) where Kohn went beyond the conclusion stated by Johnson, Johnson, and Scott (1978); this was a minor point, however. Overall, the analysis of citations and interpretations showed Kohn to be relatively accurate, though a bit biased in favor of his hypothesis on the value of cooperation. I believe that the quality of the research stands up well against current standards for such work.

Some of Kohn's conclusions go beyond the evidence. For example, he seems to generalize from studies of small groups to large organizations or to nations. Kohn does recognize this problem (see p. 78) and suggests that it is a good area for research. Also, in writing about the American economic system (p. 180), he concludes, "The economic system that predicates wealth on poverty, power on powerlessness, is implicitly accepted even by those with the greatest incentive to challenge it." These generalizations detract from the overall result.

Kohn offers some interesting distinctions early in the book, such as competition based on mutually exclusive goal attainment. This distinction is further refined to cases in which both parties work actively against one another (as in tennis) and in which parties do not directly interfere with each other in the pursuit of the same goal (as in bowling). I wish he had done more with these concepts in his analysis. In some places I did not understand his definitions; for example, the distinction between trying to beat the competitors and trying to do the best for oneself is not always clear. Sometimes he seems to equate capitalism with competition and regulation with cooperation. As an example of the latter, he states (p. 76), "When regulation is cut back in order to bring more competition to the marketplace, we again witness the true consequences of this competition: its advantages often prove illusory or short-lived or selective." To the extent that I understand it, I believe this statement to be incorrect.

The writing is interesting, but cumbersome for persons who like to examine the support for various points. Kohn's evidence is put into footnotes, often in a sketchy way. The footnotes, placed near the end of the book, contain the reference citations, some of which are reported in a shorthand that requires the reader to go back to a preceding citation to identify the source. The references are listed at the end of the book.

No Contest is a useful book. It summarizes a large body of empirical evidence on competition and does so relatively accurately. Though some bias is present, it does not seem to have a significant effect on the conclusions. This summary of the research should cause us to reconsider the frequent use of the competitive model in our work as marketers, marketing educators, and marketing planners. Until we can produce evidence favoring the use of competition in marketing or related situations, we should be aware that many marketing prescriptions may be based on false premises about the value of competition. These assumptions may lead us to make poor decisions about how to do marketing and how to teach it.

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[1] Kenneth Weissman aided in the examination of the accuracy of the citations and Robert W. Keidel commented on a previous version of the review.

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