Edward Eaton
MARKETING

COURSE

Marketing Philosophy

Purpose, ethics, honesty and trust: the great ideas from Aristotle to Rawls turned into practical tools for persuading without manipulating, making hard calls and building a brand worth believing in

For owners, marketers, agency staff and students. Beginner to advanced.

Written by Edward Eaton • edwardeatonmarketing.com

Edition 1, November 2026

Before you start

This course is educational. It is not legal, financial, medical or regulatory advice. Advertising platform rules and UK law change, so always check the current policies and guidance before you run ads. Links to the official sources are at the back.

Examples marked **illustrative** show a method with made up numbers so you can see the arithmetic. They are not promises of results. Results depend on your business, area, budget, offer and follow up.

Results I quote as real come from my own client work, with details removed.

© 2026 Edward Eaton Marketing. This course is licensed to the buyer for personal or business use. Please do not share, post or resell it. You may print it and keep a copy.

Contents

START HERE	Welcome and how to use this course
CHAPTER 1	Why philosophy matters in marketing

START HERE

Welcome and how to use this course

Every marketing decision has a philosophy in it, whether or not anyone has named it. Choosing what to promise is a decision about honesty. Choosing whom to target is a decision about fairness. Choosing how hard to push is a decision about respect. Most businesses make these choices by habit, by copying competitors or by whatever the agency suggests. This course gives you the thinking tools that philosophers have refined over two and a half thousand years, translated into plain language and tied to real marketing decisions.

WHAT YOU WILL BE ABLE TO DO

- Explain what value means, who creates it and who captures it
- Understand honesty beyond "do not lie": misleading by implication, omission and framing
- Spot weak and dishonest arguments in ads, and write sound ones
- Explain how trust works, why information gaps destroy markets and how reputation repairs them
- Tell persuasion from manipulation with clear tests
- Respect autonomy, get real consent and treat vulnerable people fairly
- Apply the major ethical theories to a real decision and compare what each says
- Think clearly about purpose, stakeholders, society and sustainability claims
- Handle grey areas with a repeatable decision method
- Write a principled marketing code your business can live by

How the course is laid out

CHAPTERS	TOPIC
1 to 3	Why philosophy matters, what value is, and honesty and truth
4 and 5	Reasoning and honest argument, and trust
6 and 7	Persuasion and manipulation, and autonomy, consent and vulnerability
8	The major ethical theories, applied to marketing
9 to 11	Purpose and meaning, ethics in practice, and marketing and society
12 and 13	Building trust that lasts, and writing a principled marketing code
Appendices	A one page summary, a decision tool, twelve dilemmas, an honesty audit, a fallacy guide, code templates, capsule guides to the thinkers, a glossary, a reading list and a toolkit spreadsheet

Each chapter has the same shape: the question, the ideas and who developed them, how they apply, a worked example, common mistakes, an exercise and a summary. Examples marked illustrative are made up.

What this course is, and what it is not

- **It is practical.** Philosophy is used here as a toolkit for decisions. You will not be asked to settle ancient debates.
- **It does not give one right answer.** Reasonable people, and different ethical theories, disagree. The aim is clearer thinking and defensible choices, not a verdict machine.
- **It is not legal advice.** The law sets a minimum. I refer to UK rules where relevant, such as the CAP Code, the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Act 2024 and data protection law, but check the current text and take advice for your sector.
- **It is not a sermon.** I am not saying marketing is bad. Most marketing helps people find things they want. The point is to do it well.

Why bother? The business case, honestly

I will argue throughout that honest marketing is also good business, because trust is valuable and fragile. But I do not want to rest the case on that alone. If ethics were only worthwhile when it paid, it would be a form of calculation. The better view is that being decent to customers is part of running a business you can be proud of, and that it usually turns out to be sensible too. Both points matter, and I try to keep them separate.

How to use it

- Keep a notebook. For each chapter, write your own answers to the exercises, using your real business.
- Use the dilemma cases in Appendix C with your team. Discussion works better than reading.
- Write your marketing code in Chapter 13, and revisit it every year.

A NOTE ON SOURCES

I name the thinkers behind each idea and describe their views in my own words, as I understand them. Philosophy is contested, and my summaries are short. The reading list at the back points to the originals, and you should read some.

CHAPTER 1

01 Why philosophy matters in marketing

IN THIS CHAPTER

- What philosophy is, and the questions it asks that law and tactics do not
- The gap between legal, ethical and wise
- Aristotle on practical wisdom: judgement over rules
- The moral questions hidden in everyday marketing
- A first map of the course: the questions you will learn to ask

Philosophy has a reputation for being abstract. At its core it is the practice of asking careful questions about what we believe and why, and following the answers where they lead. In marketing, the questions are concrete: Is this claim fair? Would the customer agree to this if they understood it? What do we owe the people we sell to? Answering them well is not an academic exercise. It decides what you publish.

What philosophy adds

TOOL	QUESTION IT ANSWERS	WHAT IT CANNOT TELL YOU
Tactics and data	What works?	Whether it is right
Law and regulation	What is allowed?	What is wise or decent in the gaps, or where the law has not caught up
Philosophy	What should I do, and why? What do these words mean? What follows from what?	What will sell. It helps you decide what to sell

Legal, ethical and wise are not the same

Three things are easy to confuse.

TEST	QUESTION	EXAMPLE (ILLUSTRATIVE)
Legal	Can I get away with it under the law and the rules?	A claim with just enough small print to be technically compliant
Ethical	Is it right, treating people fairly and honestly?	The same claim, which most readers will misunderstand, may still deceive them
Wise	Is it good for the business and the people it serves, over time?	It may win a sale and lose a customer and a reputation

Something can pass the legal test and fail the ethical one, and the other way round: law is often a rough, slow and incomplete expression of ethics. Regulators use the idea of the "average consumer" and the "overall impression" of a message, which is a form of ethical judgement about what honest communication is. Being ready to apply that judgement to your own work, before a regulator does, is the habit this course builds.

Practical wisdom

Aristotle, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, argued that good conduct is not a matter of following a rulebook. It requires **phronesis**, usually translated as practical wisdom: the ability to see what matters in a situation and to judge well what to do. Rules help, but no list of rules can anticipate every case. A person of practical wisdom has good habits, a clear sense of the purpose of what they do and the judgement to weigh competing considerations.

For a marketer, this means two things. First, a code of conduct is necessary but not sufficient. You will meet cases that no code anticipates. Second, judgement improves with practice, reflection and discussion. This course gives you frameworks for that practice.

The moral questions hidden in everyday marketing

Notice how many routine decisions are ethical decisions in disguise.

EVERYDAY DECISION	UNDERLYING QUESTION
Writing a headline claim	Is it true, and will people understand it as it is true?
Showing a "was" price	Is the reference price honest?
Choosing a customer segment	Whom am I including, excluding or exploiting?
Using a countdown timer	Is the urgency real?
Collecting an email address	Do people know what they are agreeing to?
Replying to a bad review	Am I honest, fair and respectful?
Setting a price rise	Is it fair, and how will I explain it?
Briefing an agency	Am I responsible for what they do on my behalf?

The questions this course teaches you to ask

1. **Value:** Who gains from this, and is the gain real? (Chapter 2)
2. **Truth:** Is it true, and not misleading in effect? (Chapters 3 and 4)
3. **Trust:** Does it build or spend trust? (Chapters 5 and 12)
4. **Respect:** Does it work through the customer's reasoning, or around it? (Chapters 6 and 7)
5. **Fairness:** Would I accept this if I were on the other side? (Chapter 8)
6. **Purpose:** Is it consistent with what we are for? (Chapter 9)
7. **Consequences:** Who else is affected? (Chapter 11)

WORKED EXAMPLE (ILLUSTRATIVE): THE SAME CAMPAIGN THROUGH THREE TESTS

A kitchen firm plans an ad saying "Last chance: 30 per cent off ends Friday". The "last chance" has been running every month for a year, and the 30 per cent is off a list price that few customers ever paid.

TEST	VERDICT	REASON
Legal	Probably not	Fake deadlines and inflated reference prices are likely to be misleading under the CAP Code and the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Act 2024
Ethical	No	It deceives people about the deadline and the saving, to pressure them
Wise	No	Repeated "last chances" teach customers to wait for the next one, damage trust, and invite complaints and regulatory attention

The tests agree here. The harder cases are those where they do not, which is why you need the tools in the rest of the course.

COMMON MISTAKES

- Treating "it is legal" as the end of the discussion.
- Treating ethics as a list of prohibitions, with no positive aim.
- Believing that ethical decisions are only for large corporations.
- Waiting for a scandal or a complaint before thinking about it.
- Leaving ethical decisions to whoever writes the ads.

DO THIS NOW

List ten marketing decisions you made in the last month. For each, write the underlying ethical question in one sentence. Choose the three where you felt least certain, and keep them for the exercises later.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Philosophy asks what we should do and why. Tactics and law cannot answer that.
- Legal, ethical and wise are different tests. Use all three.
- Aristotle's practical wisdom means judgement, trained by reflection, not only rules.
- Many everyday marketing decisions are ethical decisions in disguise.

FREE SAMPLE

Want the full course?

This is the free sample of **Marketing Philosophy**: the welcome chapter and Chapter 1. The full course has 23 sections:

- Chapter 2: What is value?
- Chapter 3: Honesty and truth
- Chapter 4: Reasoning and honest argument
- Chapter 5: Trust
- Chapter 6: Persuasion and manipulation
- Chapter 7: Autonomy, consent and vulnerability
- Chapter 8: The major ethical theories, applied
- Chapter 9: Purpose and meaning
- Chapter 10: Ethics in practice: dilemmas and decisions
- Chapter 11: Marketing and society
- Chapter 12: Building trust that lasts
- Chapter 13: A principled marketing code
- Appendix A: The course on one page
- Appendix B: The decision tool
- Appendix C: Twelve dilemmas for discussion
- Appendix D: The honesty audit
- Appendix E: A field guide to fallacies in marketing
- Appendix F: Code of practice templates
- Appendix G: Capsule guides to the thinkers
- Appendix H: Glossary
- Appendix I: Reading list and sources

Get the full course at **edwardeatonmarketing.com/courses/marketing-philosophy-course**.

Put it into practice

Work through one chapter at a time and keep a simple log of what you change and what happens.

Want a hand setting it up, or a second pair of eyes on your account? edwardeatonmarketing.com/contact

© 2026 Edward Eaton Marketing