

Guest Editorial: Is Marketing Academia Losing Its Way?

There is an alarming and growing gap between the interests, standards, and priorities of academic marketers and the needs of marketing executives operating in an ambiguous, uncertain, fast-changing, and complex marketplace. This has gone beyond the familiar dilemma of academic research pitted against practical relevance. Our contention is that this widening divergence has become detrimental to the long-term health of the field. We share our concerns and offer proposals for better aligning the interests of marketing academics and practitioners to their mutual benefit. We are guided by the belief that the role of academic marketing is not just to advance theory and methods but also to have an impact on the practice of marketing.

Diagnosing the Divergence

Our concern centers on the following question: Why do marketing academics have little to say about critical strategic marketing issues and emerging issues, such as the impact of networked organizations, the impact and marketing of emerging technologies, the value of open innovation, the blurring of value chains, unethical marketing practices, the role of brands in global markets, the role of marketing when the customers are empowered, and the constant struggle of marketing practitioners to get a seat at the corporate strategy table? We certainly endorse and acknowledge ongoing work in marketing academia that contributes to practice, with the caveat that the audiences for most of this work have a tactical perspective because they are lower in the organization—often in the marketing research department.

Granted, the larger system of business education is under increased scrutiny for a presumed loss of relevance. Criticisms are being leveled at the dominant MBA focus on narrow analytical and cognitive skills, stylized treatment of complex issues by teachers with no direct business experience, self-centered careerism, and the declining recognition that management is as much a clinical art as a science. It is further charged that the prevailing paradigm of reductionist, narrowly specified, and fragmented research, produced by “solo scholars” or small teams, cannot address the multi-functional and interconnected problems of managers. Although these concerns loom large for management

education in general, the dilemma is magnified in marketing—a field that is supposed to be concerned about the connection of the firm with its customers and other stakeholders.

Within this context, the domain of academic marketing has been steadily shrinking, with a concomitant loss of academic influence. Some of this diminution is a consequence of the preemption of marketing frameworks, concepts and methods by other fields of academic enquiry. This has happened primarily because of the overlap with other functional areas and the lack of progress made by marketers in some of these critical areas. The strategy field has successfully imported fundamental marketing concepts such as business and market selection, business and revenue model definition, segmentation, positioning, innovation and diffusion processes, and value propositions, making them more useful to general managers (e.g., Christensen and Raynor 2003; Kim and Mauborgne 2005; Porter 1985). Through a process of benign neglect, academic marketing has left voids that other fields have filled. The best work on product quality and variety, product design, and comprehensive customer solutions is in operations management (e.g., Ulrich and Eppinger 2007). New and insightful perspectives on channels are being provided by network theorists, and the valuation of intangible marketing assets is shifting to finance and accounting (e.g., Ittner and Larcker 1998, 2003). The consumer insights getting the most notice in the public’s eye are attributable to behavioral economics and no longer to marketing (e.g., Thaler and Sunstein 2009). Some of the best work on new media and its applications is being done by a cross-functional, predominantly nonmarketing group at Media Labs at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, initiated by Negroponte (1995) and carried on by Jenkins (2008).

Finally, the growing balkanization of academic marketing into quantitative modeling and consumer behavior has diminished research on strategic marketing issues. Consumer behavior researchers are reluctant to consider the managerial implications of their work. With some notable exceptions, there are few efforts to address the critical challenges facing marketing managers from both the modeling and the behavioral perspectives. Holding all research to rigorous standards is correct. However, we need to ensure that the concepts and methods employed are appropriate for generating valid insights into critical research questions, not whether the methods are the most advanced.

The prevailing research paradigm in most parts of marketing academia is to begin with a new methodology, data set, or a behavioral hypothesis and only then occasionally ask where it might be applied. This reduces the odds of

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addressing a pressing marketing issue. The resultant conclusions are of some relevance to other researchers, but they offer little guidance for marketing decision making. We believe that a better approach is to begin with an important problem and bring to it the best combination of methodology, data, and theory. Research that illuminates important, substantive issues should be applauded, even if no new methodologies or theories are advanced.

Agenda for Action

Our proposals are aimed at stimulating debate within the community of marketing scholars. Our goal is to reverse this trend toward marginalization of the academic discipline and, thereby, to enhance the influence of marketing practitioners in the strategy dialogue. We center our comments on two principle ideas—challenging the inward mind-set and bringing greater relevance to the research agenda.

Challenge the Inward-Looking Mind-Set

What can be done to reverse the creeping bifurcation of academic marketing into two self-contained and self-referential areas—quantitative methods and behavioral studies—without losing the undeniable advantages of deep immersion and specialized mastery of a topic? First, we believe that few business problems can be solved by either area alone and that both behavioral and quantitative approaches are needed. Mechanisms are needed to stimulate and fund large-scale research initiatives that encourage collaboration. Perhaps this would help bridge the silos that academic marketing has created with industry and with other management disciplines. Second, the history of the field endorses the value of engagement with practitioners. Some of the best work has come from collaboration between marketing scholars and managers who are developing “theories-in-use” and experimenting with responses to difficult problems. Academics bring rigor to the process of learning from these experiments, developing new tools, and testing the generality of the findings. We contend that the gulf between marketing academics and senior marketing and corporate officers has widened. Academics are not listening to marketers’ needs and the issues they confront. The number of academics attending chief marketing officer and other chief executive officer forums or paying attention to the output is negligible.

Bring Greater Relevance to the Research Agenda

Academic marketing will be more self-confident, relevant, and respected if it can deploy its strengths in theory development, methodology, and rigor of inquiry to pressing strategic issues. This would be mutually beneficial because the solutions to the difficult problems facing corporations and society require a combined approach. Consider the following illustrations of issues that are researchable:

1. *Major societal concerns:* How can marketing contribute to rebuilding confidence in the global financial system, finding a role for consumer choice in health care reform, reducing obesity, encouraging energy conservation, meeting the needs of consumers in developing countries, and so forth?

2. *Achieving profitable growth:* How can marketing improve practice by finding the best pathways for innovation that create new value for customers, contain the risks of innovation, use the resources of partners in an open innovation model, and so forth?
2. *Dynamic resource allocation:* How can researchers bring about insight and accountability to help determine the value of marketing to the firm/organization and play a bigger role in the establishment of the marketing budget and how it should be allocated over markets, regions of the world, marketing instruments, and so forth?
4. *The new marketplace:* What are the implications for marketing and business strategy of the advances and proliferation of new media and channels, the fragmentation of markets, the shift of power to the empowered consumer, and so forth?

These four areas are core domains in which academic marketing should have a direct impact and an influence on other disciplines.

To effectively address these and related challenges facing management, academics must (1) improve their understanding of the changing environment, including the current global financial crisis and recession, the new regulatory climate, and the diminished consumer confidence in a “hot, flat, and crowded” world; (2) understand the interdependencies among the environmental forces, as well as among the four domains of investigation we suggest, and the role of other disciplines in addressing these challenges; and (3) understand the implication of the four domains for the required marketing competencies the firm and its network need to develop.

Toward Implementation

To address these fundamental challenges successfully, the discipline needs three sets of interrelated initiatives. Our proposed initiatives are a reflection of our concerns about the direction the field is taking. We hope to help set an agenda whereby we can have a lasting impact on the practice of marketing, not just through our teaching but also through our research. Although some of the issues we identify are institutional and apply to the field, they should apply to each of us as individuals as well—even more so for the tenured faculty in the field. It is our individual responsibility (1) to work on significant and relevant areas of research that make a difference and to demand that of our colleagues as well and (2) to champion the needed institutional changes that will facilitate it.

Change the Incentives

It is a human nature to respond to what is rewarded. Currently, most promotion and tenure decisions depend on articles published in leading journals and, to a lesser degree, on teaching and service. It is time that promotion and tenure decisions also take the contributions to the advancement of marketing practice into consideration. If it is accepted that part of the purpose of business schools is to advance the practice of business and, in our case, the practice of marketing, including its impact on business strategy, business success, and society’s ability to address its challenges, this

should be part of the consideration for tenure, salary increases, and recognition.

Bring Rigor and Relevance to Doctoral Programs

Most of the doctoral marketing programs today provide rigorous training in research methodology and theory. In general, candidates must declare which track they are in, behavioral or quantitative, not the substantive issues they are addressing, and then dive deeper into their respective disciplines. This provides a good foundation for conducting research, and we do not quibble with any of it. What is of concern is what is missing—namely, marketers' problems and the understanding of and passion for business. Little, if any, time is spent on understanding the context of business and the day-to-day and strategic issues confronting managers. We believe that because marketing is an applied business discipline, it is necessary to spend time in doctoral programs on these issues. Having more doctoral students coming directly from undergraduate programs has made it possible to grab some of the brightest students before they are consumed by business and MBA programs and, thus, their starting salaries. That being said, the lack of business experience and/or MBA training has come at a cost—the lack of exposure to management issues.

Mobilize the Institutions

Journals play a pivotal role. Rather than taking leadership and calling for research that addresses pressing practitioner issues, journals are mostly content to react to what is sent to them. As a result, it is a fair question to ask who is reading the published articles. Are we mostly talking to ourselves?

The leading journals should actively solicit articles that creatively and insightfully address the concerns of senior marketers, even if they do not introduce a new methodology or advance basic theory. Currently, there seems to be little taste among the top-tier journals for thoughtful, rigorous conceptual articles that suggest new research directions. We strongly endorse the encouragement from the editor of *Journal of Marketing* for more conceptual articles.

The field of marketing has two long-established and credible bridging mechanisms in the Marketing Science Institute and the Institute for the Study of Business. These are forums in which leading academics and practitioners can meet to address common problems. Increasingly, these problems have come to be dominated by the concerns of the marketing research practitioners. We strongly encourage both organizations to stay true to their roots and to seek guidance from senior marketers and other senior executives who face significant strategic issues. It would even be desirable to solicit input from chief executive officers and chief financial officers as to what they need from marketing that

is not being adequately addressed. We believe that this will yield research priorities that will help advance the discipline and its impact.

Conclusion

Our call is for the whole marketing academic community to work on relevant business problems. This is an easier path to undertake after tenure has been achieved than before, at least until the structural changes are in place. Working on relevant issues and making a difference in the practice of marketing can be both engaging and enjoyable. It feels good when your work makes a difference. Frank Bass's (1969) greatest pride centered on the creation of the Bass model—not simply because of the stream of research that followed but also because of its widespread application in business.

It would be easy to read this editorial and pass it off as “not my responsibility,” as we wait for the institutional changes to take place. However, it is our responsibility to work on relevant problems, make a difference, and push for institutional changes. If we don't, who will? Let us heed the warning of the ancient Chinese wisdom, which says, “Unless we change our direction, we are likely to end up where we are headed.”

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