

MARKETING OR MARKETERS

What or Who Needs Reforming?

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Of late, part of the academic marketing community has shown growing interest in reforming the discipline of marketing. It might even be justifiably argued that some progress toward this end has already been made. The interest in reform in the concerned academicians seems to have arisen from two main sources of discontentment. The first source relates to their perception that an appreciable level of research conducted in academic marketing is irrelevant to marketing issues in organizations and, to their exasperation, such research is held in higher regard in the discipline. The second source of their discontentment stems from their perception of marginalization of the authority of practicing marketers by non-marketers, as evidenced by the involvement of the latter in making marketing decisions.

Though not fairly obvious, the two sources of discontentment are related, with the first being the cause of the second. A lack of research with useful managerial implications (that are clear and *definitive* at some level of abstraction) produces a corresponding lack of availability of cutting-edge, practically applicable teaching materials. The dearth of teaching materials, in turn, results either in repetition of concepts in marketing courses or in delivery of educational content that is half-baked and, hence, inapplicable. In either case, the student takeaways from marketing courses tend to be rather simplistic. This simplistic view of marketing translates into a confidence in nonmarketing professionals about their capability to make marketing decisions.

With the practical relevance of its efforts forming the key basis of the need for reform in the marketing discipline, the essential work that needs to be done may be seen as two-fold. First, the discipline needs to adopt specific approaches for ensuring that marketing knowledge that is “useful”—of practical value—is continuously and efficiently generated and appropriately disseminated on a real-time basis. Second, the discipline needs to ensure that there are structural and functional mechanisms in place that serve to facilitate progress toward those approaches.

The call for generating new outputs of relevant knowledge cannot be answered without changes in inputs (outputs result from inputs). Those inputs are represented by the outlook, behaviors, and research and teaching activities of the academicians in the discipline. Thus, for appropriate reform to occur in the marketing discipline, there needs to occur a reform in the academicians. In other words, academic marketers themselves need to change and transform some of their research and teaching activities in order to bring about a change in the marketing discipline.

This chapter discusses how marketing academicians might reform the discipline by reforming their own research and teaching. It recounts what the past has been and what the future might be with the academicians undertaking certain steps to shape it proactively. It specifically addresses the issues of practical relevance of the discipline’s efforts, providing a brief historical perspective of how academic marketing grew to stray away from practice, and then listing potential approaches that academic marketers might consider for generating and disseminating marketing knowledge that would be perceived as more useful in terms of practical relevance.

THE ISSUE OF PRACTICAL OR MANAGERIAL RELEVANCE IN ACADEMIC MARKETING

There have been extended debates in the marketing discipline on whether the discipline’s research and teaching efforts should be concerned with practical or managerial implications at all. The pure-theorists claim that like physicists, biologists, or mathematicians, academic marketers are also scientists, and thus practical relevance should not be interjected into their research discussions. The proponents of practical relevance, on the other hand, maintain that if practical relevance is not of much import, then such marketing academicians should practice their profession in other academic departments—departments that directly support or are directly relevant to their research, whether they are statistics, psychology, sociology, or any other. The advocates of practical relevance argue that as long as marketing academicians want to be in marketing, and marketing is a distinct function in business organizations, the results of the efforts of marketing academicians must be material to business organizations. In their estimation, although a publication might not have direct managerial utility, it should at least be able to articulate how the direction of research could eventually impact or improve marketing practice in the broader world.

Evidence now indicates that a preponderance of marketing academicians have begun to give some attention to the issue of practical relevance in their papers and dissertations. Even though the incorporation of this issue in research may still many times be superficial, slow, or force-fitted, the debate over it seems to be slowly becoming muted and less contentious.

In order for marketing academicians to be able to consider some approaches and mechanisms for reform, an appreciation of how academic marketing got to where it is would be appropriate.

The Past: How the Research and Teaching Pendulum Swung

The academic discipline of marketing grew as an “applied” field, historically developing by borrowing theories from other disciplines. Many would agree that economics was the “mother” discipline for marketing, and that some other disciplines, such as psychology, social psychology, sociology, anthropology, and statistics, were significant contributors to the field. During the initial stages of the growth of marketing, most of the academic research in the discipline consisted of direct application of theories or methodologies from these disciplines to the problems in marketing. Given that marketing was a new and virgin territory and that

there were thus many potential ideas that researchers could bring in, most of the issues that were chosen for research (generally from the parent disciplines) produced knowledge that had not been previously available and was, hence, perceived as useful by marketers both in practice and academics.

With business schools struggling to attain respect among other schools by demonstrating that their research was based upon accepted research protocols (i.e., accepted in other fields) and was not “atheoretical,” the trend of borrowing and applying methodologies from other disciplines continued and picked up pace. Similar to some other business disciplines, academic marketing too carried on its pursuit of avoiding being cast as a vocational field, focusing on inserting (whether discriminately or indiscriminately) theoretical rigor in its teaching and research. It thus kept mov-

ing away from practice, with the issues that were researched made artificially simple to allow them to be resolved in a manner that embraced conventional methodological rigor.

The nature of the problems or issues selected for research in the early stages stemmed from the background and training of the initial scholars in marketing, which were acquired from areas outside of marketing. Furthermore, the discipline did not strive to ensure that the candidates recruited into the doctoral programs were aware of or sensitive to the needs of the marketing world. The irrelevance of the problems researched persisted and did not diminish any with time since the newer problems investigated and studied were almost always based upon previous re- search that had solved innocuous problems in the first place. The cycle so continued (and does so to this day to a certain extent). In that vein, the research and teaching pendulum continued to swing, and, in the eyes of some, had swung to quite the extreme when researchers in marketing loathed the thought of having to provide any real *marketing*—let alone *managerial*—implications of their research! Thus, though there were improvements over time in the types of problems selected for analysis, progress in the field was not as significant as might have been with the right channels in place, such as direct interactions with managers.

As time went on, research in marketing started falling into three broad areas—quantitative/analytical, behavioral, and managerial/strategic. Besides the general distancing of academia from practice, some academicians, especially those in the managerial/strategic areas, thought that research in the quantitative and behavioral areas was particularly lacking in practical marketing implications. For these managerial researchers, insult was added to injury when the areas of quantitative and behavioral research started commanding greater respect in the discipline than managerial research. Furthermore, because of the associated prestige and the types of intellect required by these two research areas, an increasing number of budding academicians started gravitating toward them.

In the perception of some academicians, however, it was not only the two areas of quantitative and behavioral research that went adrift in terms of their bearing on real-life business issues—the managerial/strategic research area also drifted in that direction. These academicians cited, for example, the effort of managerial/strategic-area researchers to build a *unifying theory* of marketing to be a wild goose chase. That marketing could have any theory, let alone a unifying one, or any laws did not seem feasible to them. They felt that even if erroneously expounded, such a theory would be amenable to being easily proven false by practitioners.

All in all, many saw the divide between academics and practice widening, with academics being unable to keep pace with the requirements of practice.

Shaping Future Research: Swinging the Research Pendulum in the Other Direction

There has been a growing and increasingly prevailing sentiment among many in the marketing discipline that the research and teaching pendulum should be brought back and made to swing in the direction of practical relevance and of generation/dissemination of more applicable knowledge. In that light, five potential approaches are discussed below for academic marketers to consider incorporating into the future focus of their research. These are:

- Selecting the right problems for research
- Modifying the intellectual rigor perception
- Coordinating the varied research efforts in a particular area or knowledge domain
- Developing a distinctive identity for marketing
- Getting support from the business sector

Selecting the Right Problems to Research

Selecting the right marketing problems for research would be the first key step for academic marketers to consider taking toward generating meaningful applications and solutions for business. Problems selected for research should represent those for which businesses or industries of one type or another seek solutions. In that context, it is not important which of the areas of research—managerial, behavioral, or quantitative—is more useful. Rather, any type of research can prove valuable as long as there are demonstrable benefits from it for some businesses or industries.

For identifying meaningful problems, it would be necessary for researchers to stay in touch with and interact with the practicing world. This does not necessarily imply that all researchers need to be in commune with practicing managers all the time. What the academicians would need to ensure is that the discipline has constant exposure to the business community and that there are a sufficient number of avenues set up for a regular flow of information and issues from the business world. They would thus need to establish adequate channels for the orchestration of such interactions (examples of which are currently represented by the Marketing

Science Institute and the Product Development and Management Association).

An argument presented against this approach of finding solutions for the real problems of the business industry is that it falls in the domain of management consultants. That argument can be countered by distinguishing that management consultants attempt to resolve specific problems for individual clients and, unlike academicians, do not have the distinct focus or goal of advancing knowledge frontiers that can be generalized or are oriented for the greater good. In that regard, their motivations for solving problems, and hence their solutions, are quite different from those determined by academicians.

Modifying the Intellectual Rigor Perception

The educational curriculum that prospective marketing academicians go through imparts to them a regimen of certain research methodologies, instituting in them a preference for those methodologies when conducting research work. Thus, while organizations such as the Marketing Science Institute represent commendable efforts that are underway to bridge the academic and business worlds, the bias for orienting their work toward acceptable types of methodological rigor many times prevents marketing academicians from appropriately or completely attacking the marketing problems brought to fore by such organizations. Certain types of methodological rigor have come to be coveted by many researchers and have also come to be equated by the discipline with intellectual rigor. Unfortunately, such methodological rigor alone may not be conducive to resolving many real-world business problems. To make matters worse for the potential of real-world problem resolution, the brightest and the best students tend to be attracted to the rigorous-methodology/constrained-problem domain because of its equation with intellectual rigor. Real-world problems thus miss the opportunity of being worked on by these high-caliber researchers.

It is proposed here that marketing academicians attempt to modify their disposition on traditional methodological rigor and not construe such rigor to be the sole indicator of intellectual rigor. The scientific and intellectual rigor that a particular research is based on should be determined on a case by case basis, depending upon the problem being resolved. Eventually, researchers should strive to ensure that the marketing discipline *encourages*, *expects*, and *respects* the employment of appropriate creative techniques that are scientifically thorough for resolving a given real, complex problem.

Apart from rigor at the paper level, individual researchers should strive for another type of rigor—at the level of individual program of research. Such rigor would entail a controlled approach by the researcher in gradually chipping away at the shortcomings and assumptions of the individual's past research. With researchers conscious of and working toward resolving complex issues, the coordination of research at the discipline level becomes easier. This issue is addressed next.

Coordinating the Numerous Research Efforts of a Particular Area or Knowledge Domain

Knowledge can be efficiently produced if individual research efforts on an issue serve as the building blocks of possible solutions for that problem. In that light, researchers do evaluate each and every effort of theirs in terms of the potential for making a contribution to a particular problem or domain. An extension of that consideration points to a need for an instillation of a certain degree of orderliness that could possibly be brought about by timely, periodic snapshots of the state of affairs and further needs in a given domain. Without attempts at some form of coordination of individual research initiatives, there is a danger of chaos, of the possible attempts at resolving an issue going adrift, or of the domain or issue losing its very significance.

Perhaps the domain of relationship marketing (RM) would serve as a good case in point in the preceding context. When relationship marketing came to the fore, there was a flurry of papers claiming the wonders of the new paradigm and its ability to be a panacea for all that ailed marketing. Three or four years into the introduction of the concept to marketing, twenty-nine definitions of RM had been proposed, out of which ten had used the word “relationship” itself! Definitions were constructed using any of the following phrases: refers to, achieved by, purpose of, objective of, associated with, attempts to, assumes, reflects, emphasizes, and involves. Some papers claimed that RM was between two parties; others proposed it as between more than two parties. Some thought that RM was relevant only in the long term; others thought that it was appropriate even in the short term. But more importantly, when scholars tried developing it as a science, constructs proposed were all over the place in terms of whether they were antecedent, consequence, or mediating variables. For example, Opportunistic Behavior and Relationship Benefits were each modeled as both antecedent and consequence variables and Commitment and Trust were each modeled as both consequence and mediating variables. The unfortunate outcome of the situation was that there was no final resolution. Perhaps there can be no possibility of a resolution being achieved through this linear track of thinking. The truth may be that there is a positive feedback cycle between the two variables, of commitment breeding trust and of trust breeding commitment. Perhaps the choice of linear hypothesis, as compared to the positive feedback loop hypothesis, was dictated by the methodological correctness with which it could be tested, the data requirements and measurement challenges being arduous for the constant feedback model. A simple but erroneous conceptual model was thus advanced because it could be tested in the traditional methodologically rigorous manner. The result of RM being all over the map and positioned as having no significant limitations in scope was that it faced pushback from many and absolute rejection by others. It would have been beneficial if, instead, at some point early in RM's popularity, a leading journal had published an article on the caveats of RM, including issues such as: When is RM not applicable? Do all consumers want a relationship with a frequently bought consumer nondurable brand? How is extracting value from a relationship over time different from pricing strategies that incorporate low up-front costs and fees for membership, subscription, or licensing? What role do intangibles play in relationships, and how is this role any different from the notion of intangibles in the concentric-circles model of augmented product?

Based upon the lessons learned from issues such as RM, it would seem that a deliberation of a given issue as a whole and a coordination of the full range of research efforts related to its various parts would go a long way toward overcoming the deficiencies and assumptions of the individual efforts.

Developing a Distinctive Identity for Marketing

The kind of research proposed in the preceding sections would be risky and more time-consuming for any academician and would be associated with lower chances of making it successfully through the journal review process—*unless the research and publication parameters are changed in the discipline*. The latter is precisely what is being presented here as a key to developing a distinctive identity for the marketing discipline.

Changes in the research and publication parameters to reward innovative ways of addressing marketing issues that face businesses would not only bridge the gap between the academic and business worlds, but also move toward giving marketing its own identity. Senior researchers would have to lead by example for the change, by publishing articles with the kind of themes being advocated here as well as by encouraging modifications in the acceptance criteria of marketing journals. Journal editors and reviewers would also have to become more accepting of such research. Baby steps in this direction, individually and collectively by all in the discipline, can be envisioned to produce an upward spiral that would eventually culminate in marketing acquiring its own identity. This, in turn, can be anticipated to bring about a better recognition of the contributions of the marketing discipline and thereby, a greater level of self-confidence in the academicians regarding those contributions (rather than a search for approval from economists or psychologists).

Getting Support from the Business Sector

With the discipline meticulously tackling appropriate problems and exuding confidence about the value of its research, marketers will have a stronger base for approaching businesses regarding funding of their research. It is heartening to note that despite the recognized limitations of the research and teaching conducted by business schools, business schools are still heavily supported by business entities. One can only anticipate with enthusiasm what that level of support would be if the work that marketers put out in the field is more relevant to the business sector. Needless to say, researchers could base such work, in addition to any innovative methods, upon judiciously chosen and appropriately modified theories and methods from other disciplines as necessary. (The important point is that the dog—the problem—should wag the tail—the methodology—rather than the other way around.)

SHAPING FUTURE TEACHING: SWINGING THE TEACHING PENDULUM IN THE OTHER DIRECTION

Having addressed to some degree how academic marketers can ensure *generation* of useful knowledge, it would be in order to discuss some points regarding how they can ensure the appropriate *dissemination* of such knowledge. From that perspective, marketing may be considered as made up of two streams or components—the strategy stream and the operations stream.

The Two Components of Marketing: Strategy and Operations

The strategy component of marketing comprises the philosophy that professes that the basic approach of conducting business should be based upon satisfying the needs of customers—whether current or future and whether expressed or latent. It claims that such philosophy assures the long-term financial viability of a business. The component incorporates macro issues such as target segments, positioning, value propositions, brand equity, and so on. It entails knowledge that, to a large degree, is tacit.

The operations component of marketing is the part that involves the all-important details of every one of the marketing functions and marketing know-how, for example, how to listen to the voice of the market, how to research advertising effectiveness, how to measure brand equity, how to develop pricing strategies, how to develop and test optimal promotional strategies, how and when to establish relationships, and so forth. The details may be carved up in any of a variety of ways—as customer linking, bonding and sensing, as four Ps (product, place, promotion, and price), as attracting and satisfying customers, as creating and fulfilling demand, or as a new paradigm of relationships. All these relate to and provide answers for an organization's day-to-day operations. Marketing models (quantitative, behavioral, or others) and research techniques constitute a significant part of this component. Knowledge in this component is mostly explicit.

Teaching the Two Components

In disseminating marketing knowledge, marketers err on two dimensions. First, in their pedagogical approach, they do not differentiate enough between the strategy and operations components of marketing. Rather, they incorporate the two components into one unit and then treat that unit either as a science or as an art, neither of which is a perfectly accurate approach. Second, in teaching the operations component, marketers do not cover the necessary materials in sufficient detail to guard against their potential misapplication. Topics belonging in the realm of this second component are not taught with all the caveats spelled out. Nor are they comprehensively covered from all angles to provide solutions for all product-market nuances. Because of such treatment, many solutions that are proposed in marketing are either discarded altogether or applied erroneously.

It is proposed that marketers consider it essential to delineate the strategy and operations components of marketing in teaching courses and in other methods of dissemination of marketing knowledge. As already mentioned, the knowledge base represented by the

two components is quite different—implicit in strategy and explicit in operations. Delineation of the two components would ensure that they can be focused upon individually toward the goal of boosting the impact and perception of marketing in every sphere, whether as a research and teaching subject in business schools or as a function in business organizations. As it stands today, the strategy component is so ingrained in the DNA of routine business that its learning and practice is warranted for all top managers and chief executive officers (CEOs), as well as for nonmarketing departments, such as finance, manufacturing, and R&D. The operational component, on the other hand, is expected to be executed exclusively by marketing professionals.

The strategy component of marketing, given its tacit nature, should be taught as much like an art as a science. A close analogy to this might be found in cooking, where a master chef needs to gain expertise about the science of food and also master the art of cooking. An interesting mix of art and science, the knowledge of the strategy component appeals to, and is pertinent and useful to, both marketers and nonmarketers. If marketers want to advocate the philosophy that for any firm, the route to long-term financial viability is through satisfying customer needs, then the strategy component becomes basic in business. As such, it should be taught to all business students as a fundamental course in marketing rather than as a capstone course to marketing majors. If taught to all, practiced by all, and considered useful by all, the concept of marketing strategy will, in most likelihood, be adopted and absorbed by other disciplines. And the more other disciplines borrow from marketing, the more marketing will be able to establish its own identity—representing a potential cause for celebration. That situation would be similar to economists enjoying a borrowing of their concepts by other fields. Marketers must, however, watch out for the associated temptation of resting on their laurels, and just like economists keep their wares current, they must too.

As far as the operations component of marketing is concerned, both the breadth and depth of what is imparted by academic marketers in its education can be improved, with the potential caveats and pros and cons in its practical application pointed out more effectively and thoroughly. As mentioned earlier, this component has heavyweight contents—quantitative and other models, research, simulation, and decision support systems, to name a few, to aid in marketing decisions. For any meaningful learning to occur in this regard, students ought to be *actually* engaged in real operational steps and processes, examples of which include: allocating and buying media for the dollar amount budgeted by a particular advertising strategy, writing storyboards, conducting research to test the effectiveness of a message, learning and applying different advertising response models and reviewing their pros and cons, testing the effectiveness of various promotional strategies and campaigns, designing measurements systems for customer satisfaction and its drivers, and segmenting a particular product market with real data in a real competitive landscape. The point is that it is not sufficient for students to know, for example, only the hierarchy of effects and the other psychological components of advertising. There is more to advertising in the business world than its scientific basis. The same is true for other areas of marketing.

If teaching courses for the operations component are not constructed with more in-depth consideration to potential real-world applications, there is a danger that either materials from the strategy component will be repeated in these courses or that the relevance of the information disseminated will miss its mark. Additionally, without attaining a good grasp of this component, marketers in business are apt to misapply and misuse models that form a key part of the component.

The structure of marketing electives generally presents ample scope and time for allowing incorporation of the aforementioned details. Marketing courses for MBAs and undergraduates are generally less demanding and exacting than courses in subjects such as finance. There seems to be a hierarchy or pecking order in subject majors, with students who have quantitative abilities tending to opt more for a major in finance or accounting. By increasing the level of its expectations from students and by delivering more intensive content, marketing can expect to impact that trend and attract more students who are seeking a challenging stream of work. It needs to be pointed out though that the recommendations for more intensive content, rather than based upon an intent to make the discipline difficult, are based upon a recognition of the value such knowledge content can bring to business. In the current environment, because such information is not routinely available in business and does not make up a routine part of marketing, not only are *marketers* marginalized but also *marketing* tends to be looked at in a skeptical or unsure manner by senior managers. As one CEO said, “when executives from other disciplines ask for dollars, I know what I am getting in return; with marketing, I never know if the money will be well spent.” Thus, academic marketers may consider redesigning marketing education such that marketing strategy details are taught as a part of a fundamental marketing course to all business students, and marketing operations is taught in all its depth and breadth to marketing majors.

INSTITUTING FACILITATING MECHANISMS FOR THE PROPOSED APPROACHES

With some potential approaches for the reform of their research and teaching having been identified for academic marketers, the following suggestions are presented regarding some mechanisms they might institute for facilitating progress in that direction.

Reframing and Redefining the Role of Journal Editors

Editors of marketing journals can contribute in a significant way to moving the discipline forward. The discipline would benefit from structuring editorial positions such that in addition to having responsibilities for receiving articles for review, forwarding them to reviewers, collating reviewer comments, making final decisions, and executing other gate-keeping functions for research publications, these positions are expected to play an expanded leadership role. Editorial function may thus be defined to encompass a requirement for setting some vision for the knowledge domains researched in the discipline and for leading and coordinating research in a purposeful direction, in a well thought out and concerted manner. In the context of this chapter then, it would follow that editors should encourage attempts at investigation of the kinds of problems discussed herein and bring about required changes in acceptance criteria and acceptable methodologies for research publications.

A New Body to Steer Research and Teaching

An avenue through which marketing academicians might move their cause forward is with one or more formal bodies of relevant experts—boards, panels, committees, or commissions (similar to the Financial Accounting Standards Board, but with a rather different scope)—responsible for laying down research and teaching guidelines, standards, criteria, and so on. By having a permanent structure for setting and resetting direction in this manner on an ongoing basis, marketing academicians would ensure that there exists a forum for discussion of critical marketing issues and that marketing knowledge domains make more meaningful contributions. The efforts of such a steering force would allow the agenda of the academicians to be reviewed and revised as necessary, and might also earn better recognition for the discipline.

For greater effectiveness, it would be appropriate for the suggested body or bodies to have diverse representation from all hierarchical levels of marketing researchers, teaching instructors, and editors, as well as marketing professionals from the business sector. A rotating membership (of a two- or three-year term) would probably be most effective in ensuring a broader input base and continual generation of fresh perspectives.

Publication of a Textbook on the State of the Art of Marketing

Marketing academicians might find that their concerns regarding reform are partially addressable through publication of a textbook that takes stock of existing marketing knowledge (including marketing models, theories, and methods) and that outlines where marketing knowledge is deficient and what kinds of information are still missing at this juncture. A snapshot of the existing knowledge base and the current marketing environment would be helpful to both students as well as academicians. For students, it would point out what and how to practice and where to be careful. For academicians, the book would serve as an excellent source of potential ideas for research.