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Should we worry about an ‘academic-practitioner divide’ in marketing?¹

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Abstract

In marketing, as in other areas of management studies, there is a feeling abroad that lines of communication need to be improved between those who work largely in the academic sphere and the practitioner community. The papers presented in this journal issue explore the nature of the ‘academic-practitioner divide’, investigate the reasons for it and the barriers to communication that exist, and put forward ideas for improving the effectiveness of academic-practitioner collaboration. However, members of the academic community should carefully avoid a headlong and uncritical rush for managerial relevance, since their claim to a unique position in the knowledge production process relies on maintaining objectivity and a certain distance from the day-to-day pressures of marketing management.

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An emerging orthodoxy

It is perhaps telling that in response to the call for papers for this special issue, entitled ‘the academic/practitioner divide in marketing: myth or reality?’, nobody chose to submit a paper supporting the ‘myth’ side of the argument. Authors seemed to regard it as more or less axiomatic that an academic/practitioner divide existed, and moved on quickly to discuss why this was the case and how things might be improved. The field of marketing is far from unique in this. Across the management disciplines a consensus seems to be emerging that much, or perhaps most, of the work done by academics is of limited relevance to practitioners. Starkey and Madan (2001) make the case in the field of management research, while Hodgkinson and colleagues (2001) warn of the likely demise of university academics as key stakeholders in the knowledge production process in the field of organisational psychology.

A consistent story is beginning to emerge that maps the supposed route to managerial relevance for academic researchers in such fields as marketing. External factors, such as public funding levels and increased competition within the higher education sector, are causing academic institutions and researchers to reflect on their role within society and perceive the need to make their research more relevant to the concerns of key stakeholders – in the case of marketing the practitioner community is such a stakeholder. As a result, researchers will have to move away from single-discipline abstract research in the direction of trans-disciplinary, problem-centred research. This is the oft-cited move from Mode 1 to Mode 2 knowledge production (Gibbons et al., 1994). In making their work more relevant, academic researchers have certain barriers to overcome. For example, the academic incentive structure does not favour applied research, academic institutions are not perceived as reliable partners by businesses, and standard academic modes of written expression are profoundly unattractive to managers (Ankers & Brennan, 2002; Starkey & Madan, 2001). Researchers will have to develop new competencies (Hodgkinson et al., 2001), greater familiarity with the managerial world (Das, 2003), and their research will be judged against the double hurdle of rigour and relevance (Varadarajan, 2003) in order to qualify as ‘pragmatic science’ rather than descending to the sad depths of ‘puerile science’ (Hodgkinson et al., 2001). Increasingly the validity of academic research will be defined in terms of usefulness, and the gap between theory and practice will gradually diminish bringing about greater ‘synchrony’ (Aram & Salipante, 2003; O’Driscoll & Murray, 1998).

Organisation of the special issue

It is convenient to break down the above process into a series of logical steps. First, to acknowledge that a divide exists; second, to describe and to explore the nature of the divide; third, to explain the reasons for the divide and the barriers to be overcome, and, fourth, to identify concrete actions that will bridge the divide. While all of the papers in this special issue make a contribution across more than one of these steps, I have chosen to arrange them according to their principal contribution. The authors have no problem with the first step, which is largely taken as axiomatic: ‘Evidently

both the public and private B2B sectors feel that much of the discipline of marketing is inaccessible ... and/or inappropriate' (Reed, Story & Saker, this issue), 'the academic/practitioner 'gap' has now developed into a chasm' (McCole, this issue), and 'a sizeable gap between the worldviews of academics and practitioners' (Tapp, this issue). The second step, to describe and explore the nature of the divide, is the particular focus of Gary Reed, Vicky Story and Jim Saker, and of Ross Brennan and Paul Ankers. Both papers provide empirical evidence for the existence of a divide between what marketing managers consider to be important to their work, and what marketing academics are delivering in terms of educational programmes and research. Reed and his colleagues also point to significant differences of opinion between marketers in the public sector and the private sector concerning what *is* important. The four papers that follow then focus primarily on my third step, explaining why the divide exists and what barriers have to be overcome. Geir Ottesen and Kjell Grønhaug explore the instrumental, conceptual and symbolic uses of knowledge, and identify barriers to knowledge transfer in terms of the characteristics of the information, the information provider, and the information user. Patrick McCole uses the examples of retro-marketing and experiential marketing to illustrate how the academic research agenda can become detached from managerial realities. Keith Crosier then picks up the theme of language - a theme that recurs throughout this issue - and explores it in depth by examining the readability of marketing academic journals. To what extent are academic journals written in such complex language that access is effectively only open to those who have the time and motivation to learn a specialised vocabulary? Susan Baker and Sue Holt introduce another element to the debate by raising the issue of the relatively low esteem in which marketing management itself is held within the business community: "... senior non-marketers perceive marketers to be 'unaccountable, untouchable, slippery and expensive'" is one of the rather unflattering conclusions from their empirical research. And so we arrive at the fourth step, bridging the divide. As one would expect, every paper in this issue has something to say on this topic. However, the final two papers have a particularly strong focus on 'bridging'. Constantine Katsikeas, Matthew Robson and James Hulbert provide us with an agenda for relevant and rigorous research - an exploration of those areas of marketing research where academics can contribute both to scientific understanding and the practice of marketing management. This fascinating, and unusual paper, is based on focus groups conducted with a veritable Who's Who of the marketing academy. The authors suggest that similar exercises conducted in the future might involve practitioners as well as academics, and this must surely be a way to bridge the academic/practitioner divide. The identification of a research agenda that offers opportunities for rigorous and relevant research is, of course, only a start. Alan Tapp contends that applied research has been carried out as an 'underground movement', and advocates a shift in the direction of Mode 2 knowledge production. His argument, that greater relevance will be achieved when academics undertake more 'socialisation' research and less 'combination' research, is certainly deserving of attention, and if it proves controversial then so much the better!

Challenges to the orthodoxy

The consensus seems to be that the academic/practitioner divide exists, and that academic researchers should take steps to bridge the divide by making their work more relevant to managerial problems and their written output more accessible to the managerial audience. However, there is reason for caution. A number of authors have presented arguments against a headlong rush for relevance. In the management field,

Grey (Grey, 2001) argues that the factors that are supposedly driving academic researchers inexorably in the direction of greater managerial relevance are not impersonal environmental forces but political decisions, associated with the ideology of 'marketization' of social and public life. He warns that bowing to these pressures will jeopardise the very characteristic – critical objectivity – that makes academic research unique and valuable. His argument can be represented, for the marketing community, as an exercise in positioning. Academic researchers lay claim to a uniquely objective position, being funded purely to seek the truth, rather than to serve any particular interest group. By aligning themselves with a specific interest group academic researchers are repositioning themselves in order to respond to short-term political and economic pressures. Will this damage the reputation of the academy for objectivity, and simply position academic researchers alongside consultants and commercial researchers, so substantially increasing the competition they face? In marketing language, is there a risk that getting closer to practitioners will damage the only real sustainable competitive advantage that academic researchers can claim?

Other authors have pointed out that there are many potential stakeholders in academic marketing research, and have queried whether marketing practitioners should have a position of pre-eminence. For example, Varadarajan (2003) identifies five 'constituencies' – marketing managers, marketing researchers, public policy officials, marketing educators and students, and society at large. Clearly this is only a matter for debate in the case of publicly funded academic research; commercially funded research must address the objectives of the sponsor. But in the case of publicly funded academic research in marketing, is there any particular reason why we must strive for greater relevance to marketing practitioners rather than, for example, greater relevance to the consumer movement, the environmentalist movement, or the anti-capitalism movement (which can be subsumed under Varadarajan's 'society at large' category)? The case for making publicly funded academic research relevant to marketing practitioners presumably rests on providing support for improvements in business practice, which are expected to result in a net increase in social and economic welfare. But the relationship between improvements in marketing knowledge and increased social and economic welfare is not entirely clear cut. While some advances, such as improved targeting of direct mail to reduce cost, waste and nuisance, may look like unequivocal benefits to society, others, let us say the improved exploitation of 'pester power' to increase spending on fast food for children, may not (Schlosser, 2002).

Rigour and relevance

An issue that the contributors to this special issue have touched upon, but not addressed in great depth, is the relationship between rigour and relevance in academic marketing research. Interestingly, while the paper by Katsikeas and his colleagues in this issue supports the line that the simultaneous achievement of rigour and relevance is a must for academic marketing research, if you turn to Tapp's paper you will find that he is more sceptical about the happy marriage of rigour and relevance.

According to Varadarajan (2003, page 368) relevance is '... a function of the extent to which the research focuses on factors that managers can influence and examines effects that are of interest to managers.' Varadarajan divides rigour into conceptual rigour – the quality of conceptual development – and methodological rigour – the quality of empirical research. He then argues that both are essential in academic

research (cf. 'pragmatic science' (Hodgkinson et al., 2001) and the 'double hurdle' (Starkey & Madan, 2001)).

It is easy to assert that there is no conflict between rigour and relevance, and, indeed, that rigour is a prerequisite for relevance since true knowledge is a sounder basis for action than unproven knowledge. Varadarajan (2003, page 370) comments on the 'inherent folly of viewing rigor and relevance of scholarly research as inherently entailing a tradeoff', and cites several supporting quotations from other editors of leading marketing journals. Paradoxically, these appear to be simple assertions, or articles of faith, rather than verified (rigorous) facts. The eminent industrial economist Loasby (1999, page 51) has commented to the contrary that 'it is generally not the case that effective operations depend on the understanding of the truth, nor that the understanding of the truth leads directly to effective operations'. So there is clearly scope for disagreement here. Interestingly, Loasby (1999, page 56) also opines that 'the gap between the knowledge of how to develop good economic models and of how to make good managerial decisions has been filled by that amorphous collection of disciplines known as management studies'. Thus, Loasby sees marketing (among other management disciplines) as the means of closing the gap between social scientists and management practitioners. One thinks of Porter's successful application of the structure-conduct-performance paradigm to strategic management as an example of this process, while the foundations of resource-based strategy are often traced to Edith Penrose (Barney, 2002; Penrose, 1995).

It seems to be the case that the type of research output that is viewed by academics as being of the highest quality, is the type of research that is viewed by managers as being of the least interest. Despite the welcome acceptance of more qualitative research, including case studies and ethnographies, in academic marketing journals, there is little doubt that pride of place is still taken by heavyweight quantitative studies. The former present contextualised stories about real organisations and real decisions which are accessible to managers; the latter present matrices and computer-generated models showing the statistical relationships between highly abstract constructs. Naturally, both types of paper conclude with 'managerial implications'. But one can sympathise with Das (2003, page 26) when he observes that: 'Put simply, researchers make very little effort to acquire even a modicum of appreciation of the real-world managerial environment. The results can sometimes be seen in plainly vapid observations about managers and their milieu.' In similar vein, Cornelissen (2002) has argued that there is a fundamental epistemological basis for the academic-practitioner divide – that academics strive for a nomothetic and global perspective, while practitioners prefer an idiographic and local perspective. If he is right, then academics and practitioners have different definitions of rigour. In the marketing academy, rigour is often defined as the extent to which true laws of marketplace behaviour have been uncovered. In the practitioner world the search for covering laws is neither here nor there; what matters is the here and now and what action to take. Of course these are stereotypes. Doubtless there are some (not many) managers who are seekers after ineffable truths. Certainly there are many academic researchers who gave up the search for covering laws long ago as futile, if they ever bothered at all, and who prefer idiographic methods (Brownlie, Saren, Whittington, & Wensley, 1994; Buttle, 1994; Gummesson, 2001). As Gummesson (2001, page 42) has put it:

‘The majority of business schools in the world teach and do research as if statistical techniques and deductive research were the only genuine science. They claim that statistical hypothesis testing, operational definitions, clearly defined independent and dependent variables, cause and effect studies of two (or sometimes a few more) variables, experiments with control groups, and representative averages of aggregated statistical data constitute true science, even the only true science.’

By combining the views of Gummesson, Cornelissen and Das, we can construct one hypothesis for the existence of an academic/practitioner divide in marketing. In order to further their careers, marketing academics must publish in journals of ‘high standing’. The editorial policy of such journals demands that published papers must conform to very high standards of ‘rigour’. Rigour is defined very largely in terms of quantitative measures of validity and reliability (see the oft-cited Churchill, 1979). Therefore, above all, academic researchers feel pressurised to produce work that satisfies the quantitative criteria for validity and reliability. Marketing managers have an idiographic perspective; they believe that their world can only be understood by getting close to marketing phenomena, by understanding the background and context, by ‘getting inside’ the issue. Hence research that is high on mathematical rigour but is decontextualised, focusing completely on abstract concepts, carries little or no meaning for marketing managers. Although research that may be of greater interest is carried out by academic researchers, it is unlikely ever to be published in the highest profile academic journals because it deviates from the norms of ‘rigour’. Added to this, in the United Kingdom there is the pressure of the periodic Research Assessment Exercise which, Piercy (2000) argues, may also divert the attention of research academics from matters of genuine relevance to managers.

Parallels in other fields

Marketers are not alone in worrying about the ‘divide’ between theory and practice. Similar concerns have already been mentioned above in relation to organisational psychology and industrial economics (Hodgkinson et al., 2001; Loasby, 1999). Perhaps, then, such concerns are the preserve of the social scientist? Perhaps not. In discussing the relationship between research in the natural sciences and technological progress, Rosenberg (1994, page 139) makes the following assertion. ‘Everyone knows that the linear model of innovation is dead. That model represented the innovation process as one in which technological change was closely dependent upon, and generated by, prior scientific research. It was a model that, however flattering it may have been to the scientist and the academic, was economically naïve and simplistic in the extreme’. He moves on to discuss the ‘extremely high development costs’ prevailing in high technology industries, concluding that improved science – better models for predicting the performance of new designs or materials – would be a route to lower costs and improved economic performance. While there are strict limits on the extent to which technology can draw on science, Rosenberg argues that in high technology industries it is frequently the case that the scientific research agenda is heavily influenced by technology. Going rather further Rosenberg argues that ‘it is not enough to say that scientific knowledge is *applied* to the productive process; rather, to a considerable extent, such knowledge is also being *generated* there’ (Rosenberg, 1994, page 141, emphasis in original). Having discarded the ‘linear model of innovation’ and explained that technology often leads scientific progress, Rosenberg moves on to consider the more traditional influence of science on technology. He observes that this influence need not be derived from recent scientific

findings, presenting the case of the laser in which the underlying science was formulated by Einstein in 1916 but the first applications had to await the 1960s. In addition, he argues that scientific knowledge that is most likely to be useful in high technology industries requires an interdisciplinary approach, citing medical science which has benefited from closely related fields such as biology and genetics, and from more distant disciplines such as nuclear physics (magnetic resonance imaging, for example) and electronics. Moreover, he goes on to discuss the risks that by getting closer to industry scientific researchers run the risk of compromising their integrity and eventually undermining their principal claim to privileged knowledge creation – echoing the concerns of Grey (2001), and of Tapp in his paper in this issue.

‘Industrial financing of university research runs the danger that universities will increasingly have their research agendas set by their external sources of finance. In so doing, there is the threat that they will compromise their autonomy, focus on short-term problems of immediate interest to industry, and thereby suffer a loss of effectiveness as leaders in fundamental research.’ (Rosenberg, 1994, page 150)

The analogy of medical science is an interesting one, which may help us to understand the academic/practitioner divide in marketing. Doctors are not all practitioners, still less are they all general practitioners. Some are general practitioners, some are specialists, some are applied medical researchers (for example, working for companies doing clinical trials and pharmaceutical companies), and of course some are educator/practitioner/researchers working in medical schools. Other scientists, probably with a similar educational background to doctors, are engaged in pure research into the chemical and biological processes of life. Ancillary scientists, probably with a rather different educational background, concern themselves with social and psychological aspects of medicine, including the practitioner/patient relationship. A dichotomy between practitioners, who ‘do’, and scientists, who teach and research, is a poor way of reflecting the reality of the medical world. One presumes that general medical practitioners are unlikely to read the latest scientific papers on pure biological research – or that if they do it is out of intellectual interest rather than in the expectation that they will learn something that they can apply directly to their patients. For practical advice they look to specialists and applied researchers, either directly or through media to which these experts contribute.

In the marketing world we have our general practitioners, for example those managers who are responsible for all aspects of marketing for a specific product or in a specific geographical region. We have specialists such as direct marketing consultants, and applied marketing researchers. There are marketing educator/practitioner/researchers working in business schools, and other academic researchers who are engaged in pure research into the ways in which people and organisations create and sustain exchange relationships. Marketing scientists sometimes even engage in introspection about the social dynamics of their own domain – indeed, this special issue probably counts as just such introspection. Marketing practitioners, should they perceive a need for external advice, generally seek it from specialists and applied marketing researchers, just as doctors generally use medical consultants or the practitioner literature produced by applied researchers on the latest drugs and therapies. There is evidence that marketing practitioners do not read academic marketing journals (McKenzie, Wright, Ball, & Baron, 2002). Perhaps the surprise here is not that practitioners eschew these journals, but that anyone would expect them to read such material at all.

The material is generally at a high level of abstraction. It is very unlikely that a practitioner will find anything that can be used. Some may read this kind of material out of intellectual interest, as a doctor maintains an interest in the theory of biology. But marketing practitioners, who share with doctors the problem of too much information to assimilate and too little time for reading, are naturally more inclined to look at the latest advice from specialists and applied research reported in practitioner publications. Such publications may tell a doctor that a particular bacterium is exhibiting increased resistance to a commonly used antibiotic within a specified population, and recommend another therapeutic approach. They may tell a marketer that response rates to a particular direct mail technique are declining among members of a specific target market, and recommend a new communications strategy.

Take the assertion of O'Driscoll and Murray (1998, page 409) that: 'Put simply, in a discipline like marketing with its closely associated area of professional endeavour, scientific enquiry is a journey not an endpoint. The ultimate validity of a theory is its usefulness in practice.' The same assertion works perfectly well if we substitute 'medicine' for 'marketing'. But it clearly does not mean that all scientific research related to medicine must have an immediate and obvious application in medical practice. A doctor would not condemn fundamental research on mapping the human genome as 'pointless', even though the expense is enormous while the 'usefulness in practice' is both uncertain and at a considerable distance in time. By comparison, the amounts spent on fundamental research in marketing are tiny, so it does not seem unreasonable to suspend disbelief and allow that 'usefulness in practice' may be uncertain and delayed.

Building bridges

Ten years ago the founding editor of *Marketing Intelligence and Planning* wrote a rather melancholic article questioning what useful marketing advice he could offer to the transitional economies of Eastern Europe, after his lengthy academic marketing experience. He asked 'Do we have anything that we can say with confidence, "go, do thou likewise"? After 30 years in the business, I am beginning to have my doubts. Those doubts notwithstanding, I continue to give advice!' (Thomas, 1994)

The continuing quest for relevance on the part of marketing academics suggests that we still do not have a clear cut answer to the question posed by Michael Thomas. Nevertheless, all of the authors in this special issue have contributed something towards closing the academic/practitioner gap. They have investigated the nature and extent of the gap, provided explanations for its existence and identified the barriers that have to be overcome, and made constructive suggestions for building bridges. I will not attempt to summarise the many bridge-building suggestions to be found in these papers, since to paraphrase them and remove them from the context of the thoughtful argumentation of their authors would be to diminish them. Certainly, the authors' collective contribution takes forward the editorial objective of *Marketing Intelligence and Planning* 'to provide a vehicle that will help practising managers translate conceptual models and market place information into usable marketing plans'.

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