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# Reinforcing the Importance of the Marketing Practitioner-Marketing Academic Interface

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## INTRODUCTION

A common perception among marketing practitioners is that much marketing theory emanates from the fabled "ivory tower" (Etzel, 1993). However, without a foundation in theory, the practice of marketing as we know it would be based more on hunches than logic. In other words, the practice of marketing needs academics. At the same time, academics need feedback from practitioners in order to alter or fine tune their paradigms (Nataraajan and LaTour, 1993; Waller and Polonsky, 1993). To illustrate this, the paper uses the results of an exploratory study. Specifically, it uses written practitioner comments to examine practitioner-academic interaction and furnishes a feedback system to strengthen this interface.

### THE NEED TO TEST THE THEORIES OF MARKETING

In practice, marketers make use of many of the techniques which have stemmed from fundamental theoretical assumptions made in academia. For example, a marketing strategist is implicitly assuming that a certain attitude model is valid when he/she applies the model in determining consumer perceptions of various competing brands for the purpose of guiding the modification of a particular promotional theme. However, simply taking for granted the applicability of an established approach without considering the appropriateness of its assumption

base may be shortsighted and potentially counter-productive.

Consequently, the testing and evaluation of basic assumptions becomes vital to theory building in marketing. This is a process which must be taken seriously. Both practitioners and academics must consider if their theoretical assumptions are necessarily valid -- especially over time periods of dynamic market changes.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF THE MARKETING PRACTITIONER

Although this paper is couched in the practitioner-academic interface, the focus is primarily on the role of the marketing practitioner in the context of theory testing in marketing. Three primary reasons give impetus to this focus. *First*, it is realized that, over the years, the importance of the marketing practitioner has grown steadily. The recognition of the importance of the marketing concept ("satisfaction of the customer at a profit") as the guiding light for an organization as a whole has certainly acted as a catalyst to this basic realization. *Second*, since it is typically accepted as fact that end-users are important sources of new ideas for product usage and incremental innovations (von Hippel 1978; Tauber 1975), it is reasonable to expect the same to hold true in the case of the primary end-user of marketing theory, viz. the marketing practitioner.

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*Third*, it is believed that in the practitioner-academic dyad, it is the practitioner who should play the role of the ultimate investigator of marketing theory. The fundamental suggestion is that nothing in marketing thought should necessarily be taken for granted, or treated as being beyond the need for examination. Continuous evaluation and reevaluation of any theoretical base should exist to protect against intellectual stagnation on the part of academics. By the same token, practitioners may suffer from this complacency if not challenged and pushed by the academic community to be vigilant in their questioning of marketing theory which is directly applied to their decision making process.

In a pragmatic discipline (such as marketing), feedback gained from practitioner experiences provides the basis for academic refinement of the existing theoretical base (Erdem, 1997). In light of this, any interface between academics and practitioners should be viewed as facilitating the advancement of marketing for the benefit of both the academic and the practitioner (Loraas et. al., 1997).

#### AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

To substantially illustrate the forgoing orientation, an exploratory study was conducted. Specifically, a convenience sample of marketing practitioners was obtained from telephone lists supplied by local Sales and Marketing Executives chapters primarily from the Southeastern U.S. Participants were given a set of open-ended questions which called for their thoughts regarding the practitioner-academic interface. One hundred and ten practitioners were originally contacted by telephone and seventy two responded yielding a response rate of 65.5%. The sample practitioners were from a variety of business types and sizes. Their comments were content analyzed and grouped by topic.

##### *An Illustrative Analysis*

While the responding practitioners viewed the benefits of a closer working relationship with marketing academics as outweighing any drawbacks in general, several legitimate concerns were raised more than once. Primarily the concerns center around the assumption that academics lack real world knowledge. While practitioners view this as a rather substantial problem, they also point out that the implementation of an internship program within their organization would go a long way toward alleviating the severity of this situation. Typically, the usefulness of an internship program within the company was given very high marks; both the company and the academic were viewed as benefiting equally.

Although practitioners considered lack of field knowledge to be a problem, they nevertheless pointed out the substantial benefits that accrue to the

organization as a result of a closer working relationship with academics. The principal benefit was the ability to more accurately and completely incorporate marketing theory into the business. Additionally, the marketing academic was viewed by many to be the ideal individual to turn to in order to know the shortcomings in an organization's customer service program. Interestingly, a substantial minority of respondents viewed the concept of a closer working relationship between marketing practitioners and marketing academics as a "unique" idea that had not been previously considered.

Marketing practitioners stated that a closer working relationship with academics may be especially beneficial in reducing the number of new product failures. Practitioners viewed themselves as being too close to the action to be able to objectively view the situation. Additionally, the academic was viewed as bringing to the table theoretical knowledge which may be useful in spotting new product problems before they occurred. This was regarded as a key advantage of the relationship.

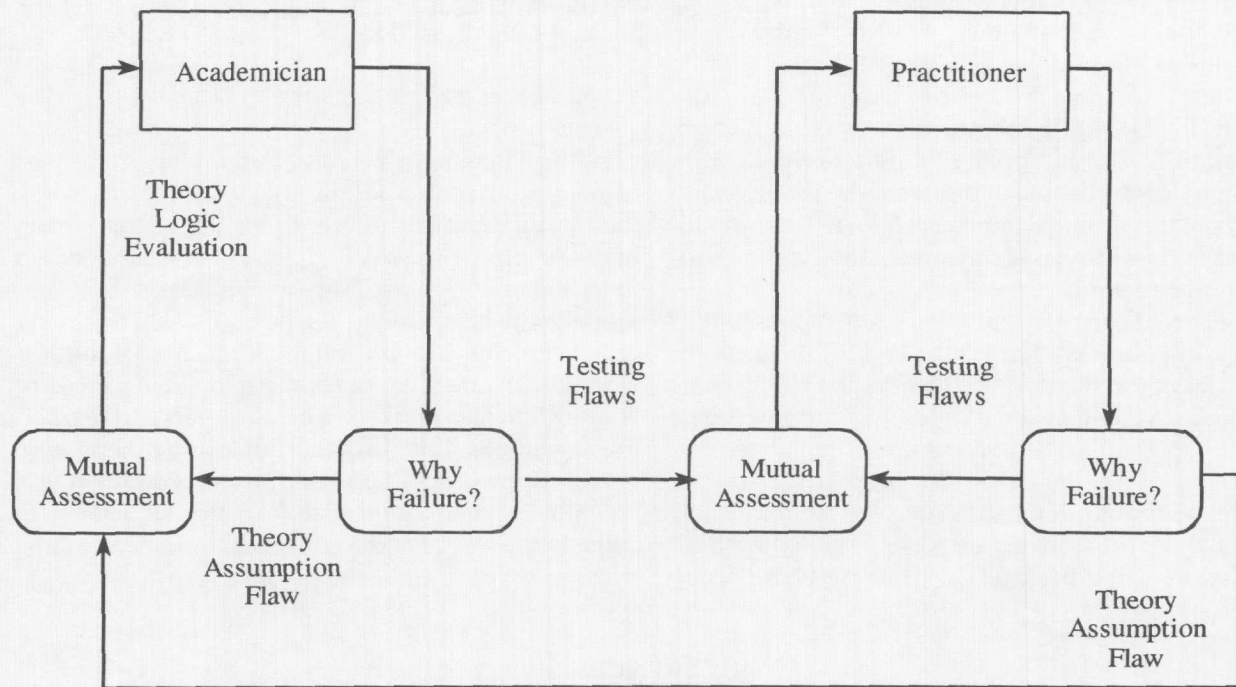
##### *Some Conclusions*

The analysis of practitioner comments clearly indicated that practitioners perceive a definite benefit in developing a close working relationship with academics. A concerted effort is needed on the part of both marketing practitioners and academics to find common and mutually beneficial interests. Figuratively, the relationship involves a feedback loop from the "theory user" to the "theory supplier". If practitioner experiences indicate results conforming to the expectations of academic work, then the success of such field tests of marketing theory needs to be communicated to the academics. Similarly, it is just as important that the failure of a field test of marketing theory be reported to the academic community. In this way, the academic knowledge base is enhanced.

Figure 1 provides a reasonable overview of the interactive process that should ensue if a field test of marketing theory fails. As the figure illustrates, it is important for both the practitioner and the academic to be involved in a post-mortem examination of the reasons for failure of the field test.

At this juncture, lest the reader get the impression that academics have been traditionally insensitive to practitioner feedback, it should be mentioned that there have been isolated instances of the use of such feedback. Perhaps, the most well known insight into the importance of such feedback was forwarded by Little (1970). Little believed that the major reason for the widespread non-utilization of academic models by managers was the fact that the managers did not fully understand the models. Apparently, the valuable experiential input of managers was seldom sought and taken into consideration in the formula-

**FIGURE 1**  
Post Feedback Process



tion of such models. This insight about the need to seek and consider practitioner input in academic work gave rise to Little's classic "decision calculus" approach. Incidentally, the well known sales call scheduling model, CALLPLAN (Lodish 1971), has its roots in the decision calculus approach. Additionally, the much touted DSS [decision support system] and its outgrowth the MDSS [marketing decision support system] (e.g., Burke et. al., 1990; also refer to Lilien et. al., 1992) have their origins in Little's realization.

Unfortunately, as alluded to earlier, such realization appears to be a rare occurrence in academia. There are many issues in marketing that desperately need both practitioner feedback and academic receptivity of such feedback to aid in the advancement of marketing knowledge. Examples include issues in fear and erotic appeals in advertising, legal/ethical concepts and issues, issues in customer satisfaction and complaint behavior, and aspects of the buyer-seller dyad in sales management. In view of these gaps in knowledge, it becomes imperative that the practitioner-academic symbiosis be carefully nurtured. To aid in this endeavor, a set of actionable recommendations is offered.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

1. *Marketing academics and corporations should agree to facilitate "faculty internships."*

Ideally, these internships should be within the corporate environment during summer months and sabbatical periods. To assist in setting up the working environment for the purpose of nurturing the theory

supplier-user symbiosis, a part of the internship should be devoted to providing "in house" familiarization for academicians within the operational field of the practitioner. While the working partnership symbiosis may continue year-round, it will be necessary for both theory supplier and user to experience being on the same "turf" so that academics can fully identify with the concerns of practitioners. Implicit in any such process is a considerable commitment of time and resources of both participating groups.

2. *Practitioners and academics must reach an understanding about the proprietary nature of information.*

Since the proprietary nature of practitioner information must be preserved, the data collected from field tests of theory may be aggregated and the name of the firm removed so that no identification of the source of the data is possible. But, for such an arrangement to work smoothly, there must be strong motivation for cooperation, trust, and mutual respect for the concerns of both academics and practitioners.

3. *Feedback loops must be established.*

The principal function of such loops is to inform academicians of theory testing failures as well as successes within marketing practice. In the past, the lack of this fundamental feedback has undoubtedly contributed to poor communications and a weakening of the link between the suppliers of theory (academics) and the users of theory (practitioners). Regardless of the outcome of any field test of marketing theory, both academics and practitioners need to deal with

successes and failures with objectivity.

Following feedback of theory testing results, it is essential for both academics and practitioners to establish the cause of any theory testing failure. Was failure due to a flaw in the testing procedure or a flaw in the logic of the theoretical assumptions? As indicated in Figure 1, the theory user should consider the possibility that an apparent failure of marketing theory may in fact be due to fundamental flaws in the testing process itself. Examples of such flaws may include vague measures of consumer attitudes and/or behavioral intentions.

As Figure 1 further highlights, another possibility for cause of failure is a flaw in the logic of the theory. For example, the theory may have failed to include additional psychological variables necessary to fully explain a particular set of resulting behaviors of consumers. With either a "testing flaw" or a "theoretical assumption logic flaw," the symbiosis in Figure 1 shows that the practitioner is joined by the academic in going back to the drawing board. For

optimal theory development to take place, a working partnership between the academic and the practitioner must be in place to share both theory testing success as well as failure.

4. *Academics need to recognize the crucial nature of their partnership.*

This will require a change in thinking on the part of many academics. The failure of academicians to link theory development efforts to testing within actual marketing practice will, at the very least, slow down the insight to be gained from their efforts.

What is being called for here and what is being called for by the practitioners of marketing (as evidenced by their comments) is a long overdue joint venture between marketing practitioners and marketing academics. This linkage is logical and necessary. With concerted efforts for sincere cooperation, it will not only prove to be mutually beneficial but also will enhance the image of the entire marketing discipline.

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