

Research Administration: From Management to Marketing

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Abstract

Research administrators have traditionally focused on the management of their organization's internal operations. However, changes in both the private and public sectors are redefining the research administrator's role and refocusing attention outward. These changes are making research administrators increasingly accountable for the responsible use of research results as well as of research funds. The resulting shift from a management to a marketing perspective is providing research administrators with new opportunities for professional growth.

Introduction

Over the past 2 decades, research administration has evolved from a part-time support function into a profession that has achieved an independent status of its own. During that evolution, new responsibilities have been acquired. Research administrators are now involved in everything from preparing proposals for submission and monitoring grant compliance to managing budgets and staff. Since the research budgets of large institutions can run into the tens or hundreds of millions of dollars, that is no small task (Lawrence, 1991; D'Agostino, Lasker, Nivin, Procter, and Stevenson, 1991). But while research administration in the past has focused on the internal management of resources, the future will increasingly focus on the marketing of research results.

The marketing of research is a development that is being fostered by events of both a private and public nature. Changes in the international marketplace, for example, are generating interest in the competitive advantage that can be achieved by private corporations through the application of scientific discoveries (Porter, 1980). As the world moves toward a global economy, access to such information for creating the next generation of products can spell the difference between success and failure for major corporations as well as for startup businesses. Foreign competitors have already become adept at converting underutilized American scientific information to their economic advantage in areas as diverse as shipbuilding and productivity management (Magner, 1991; Nonaka, 1991). That success is generating support for erecting protectionist barriers, but it is also awakening businesses to new opportunities to restore their competitiveness (Choate, 1990).

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Changing conditions are creating similar pressure on business domestically, while federal budget constraints are forcing government leaders to look for new ways to make better use of public sector research. Political leaders constrained by debt repayments and public dissatisfaction with taxes are becoming more pragmatic about research investments (Wilson, 1991). However, the desire to see visible benefits from public investments can be threatening to both basic research that involves complex projects with little short-term political value and applied research in areas that are controversial or lack popular support (Broder and Woodward, 1992; Burd, 1991). It is becoming more important than ever, therefore, that organizations demonstrate the value of the research they conduct.

Economic and political pressures are forcing both business and government to tighten their belts and seek more effective solutions to tomorrow's problems (Backer, 1991). As a result, research institutions can no longer afford to be managed as ivory tower institutions, and the results of their scientific investigations can no longer be permitted to languish in unread journals on the shelves of libraries. Research now involves the support of a wide range of scientific, economic, and political constituents, and the recognition of the importance of shaping relations with those individuals and institutions is redefining the job of the research administrator.

Research Utilization

Researchers can get so immersed in the conduct of their investigations that the translation of their findings into tangible outcomes is neglected. Reflecting on the implications of their work for the marketplace may be the last thing on their minds. Investigators have to worry about having sufficient time and money to conduct their studies in a scientifically sound fashion; they have to wonder about whether they have defined their research objectives in terms that will lead toward probable solutions; they have to worry about whether other investigators will preempt their work with similar discoveries; and before their research has even been completed, they have to begin thinking about the next project and worrying about getting their next grant.

Some researchers are fortunate enough to work in environments where the reputations of their institutions protect them from such pressures. The faith that some benefit will eventually derive from their research provides them with the freedom to pursue their investigations in the hope that the publication of their results will be rewarded by continued funding or academic tenure. Yet if they assume that their project has been completed once their research has been published in a scholarly journal or when a report has been submitted to the funding organization, the utilization of their research may also be left to someone else.

Research institutions have now begun to recognize the importance of systematically looking at ways to make better use of their research investments. They have realized, for instance, that with numerous investigators at work on a wide variety of subjects, their research component can fragment into disarray unless an effort is made to coordinate its activities. Major research universities organize their diverse research endeavors under a vice president or vice provost for research in order to better coordinate the efforts of researchers in everything from acquiring external funding support to sharing available institutional resources (McArthur, 1987). These institutions are also beginning to pay more attention to their various constituents by adding a marketing orientation to their research programs.

Marketing Research Results

The shift from a management to a marketing orientation in research administration involves refocusing from internal scientific requirements to external consumer preferences. This can involve the research administrator in such tasks as disseminating information to media consumers seeking news stories, private businesses looking for product ideas, or government institutions looking for answers to public policy problems. For many research administrators, this new orientation involves a paradigmatic shift from thinking about research as the solution to a scientific problem to thinking about it as a solution to a marketing problem (Drucker, 1973). While scientists are pondering "why" some event occurs, the research marketing administrator must be asking "what" that occurrence means for consumers. This task requires the ability to look at abstract scientific questions and see concrete consumer answers. Household consumers, for example, want detergents that remove stains more easily, businesses want software that organizes their data more efficiently, and politicians want legislative successes that get them re-elected to office (Brown, 1991).

Yet it is a mistake to think of marketing only in terms of the tactics of advertising and public relations. Marketing involves a strategic orientation that permeates the whole of an organization and impacts everything from financial investments to resource allocation and product design (Kotler, 1976). As a result, it must be viewed as part of the institutional strategy that shapes products and services from the beginning—and not merely as a set of techniques to be applied after a product has been created. Marketing involves structuring information creation and utilization from the beginning, and that change of perspective moves research administration from a support function to a leadership one. Consequently, marketing-oriented administrators who become attuned to the external environment of their institutions are likely to become more involved in organizational decision making.

A marketing orientation similarly affects internal operations by reassessing resource allocations and looking for opportunities to apply results to an organization's development. The value of research need not be limited to creating new products for external distribution or for adding new publications to one's curriculum vitae. Education research, for example, can be looked upon as a means for improving one's own institution as well as for promoting the ideas among others. Similarly, health care research is increasingly being viewed in terms of its usefulness in providing solutions to problems in the health care system where it is conducted.

Although a marketing perspective can create new opportunities, it can also create new dilemmas. The expanded role for the research administrator can create conflict with the very people who have been our traditional clients. The administrator attuned to external markets may, for example, be tempted to suggest design changes that will make research results more marketable to customers or more palatable to political constituents. As a result, some researchers will view the market-oriented research administrator as an intruder into the scientific domain. On the other hand, such intrusions can help to produce results that are more scientifically valid. For example, it was only recently acknowledged that investigators at the National Institutes of Health have often ignored gender biases in their research designs. Yet the decision to require accountability for gender differences in research design was based less on new scientific insights than on an awareness of the changing role of women in society.

Marketing as Damage Control

In addition to the favorable production of research results, marketing involves the management of information with negative consequences. Since most research has both positive and negative implications, there can be more involvement in this facet of marketing than one might anticipate. When the outcomes of scientific inquiry can affect economic investments and political interests, new research findings can unleash powerful opposition forces as those affected attempt to refute such results. Since those unfavorably affected may not feel compelled to accept the results in the same scientific spirit as the researchers who conducted the research, this can be a critical function. The marketing task then becomes one of damage control.

This aspect of marketing has gained considerable attention as researchers have discovered popular commercial products that are hazardous to people's health and created new products that threaten to make cherished industries obsolete. Those dealing with such politically controversial information can encounter indirect pressure from superiors to temper their findings as well as direct pressure in the form of threats and lawsuits. The modern research administrator can thus amass formidable adversaries backed by influential attorneys and public relations professionals committed to protecting their clients' interests. Those in major research institutions may have similar legal and public relations resources at their disposal, but administrators in smaller organizations may be on their own.

Dealing with such negative publicity can be both difficult and expensive. Consequently, this is an issue that requires consideration long before the results of research are ready for release. If, for example, the planned announcement of research results is preempted by rumors or by the premature release of incomplete information, researchers can find themselves in the midst of a firestorm that can result in the risk of a misrepresentation of research findings or the danger of having funding withdrawn. After years of hard work, researchers may need to defend themselves against attacks on their work or their reputations instead of presenting their results in a positive light. A well-conceptualized marketing strategy can prepare an organization to handle such sensitive situations.

Research Marketing and Ethics

The shift to a marketing orientation also creates additional ethical dilemmas. Researchers have long been concerned about such ethical issues as conflicts of interest and research on human subjects. Marketing takes these issues further into the public domain where politics can influence behavior. When researchers study such politically volatile issues as the closing of military bases or the intelligence of different races, they can find themselves conflicted over disseminating results they believe are politically unacceptable or morally repugnant. Then-U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop became a national hero to many when he demonstrated his commitment to science over politics by using AIDS research findings to promote health care rather than ideology. On the other hand, the National Science Foundation has recently come under attack from critics for permitting political interests to produce an overstatement of the scientific evidence for the need to train more scientists (Duderstadt, 1992).

The temptation to distort scientific evidence for economic profit can be similarly powerful. The Challenger disaster reminded us of the inherent tension between scientific interests and the commercial pressures that those in decision-making positions encounter. Now attempts to patent discoveries from the human genome project are generating criticism of both an ethical and economic nature from members of the

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international scientific community. With the proliferation of joint ventures between private corporations and research centers, administrators of these research facilities are likely to experience increased pressure to fit their research to corporate objectives, budgets, and timetables.

Economic pressures can create similar ethical dilemmas for research administrators at universities where fundraising has become as important as teaching in recent years. As the individual responsible for some of the most marketable of the university's resources, the research administrator is increasingly likely to be viewed as a potential generator of financial support. But university research administrators cannot afford to let the bright lights of the marketplace become a distraction from the university's primary mission. While it is acceptable for businesses to use research results to make a profit, research at nonprofit universities is intended to support educational pursuits. Therefore, research administrators must balance dealing with the requirements of the university budget against protecting the integrity of science.

In addition to conflicts arising from the influence of politics and economics, market-oriented research administrators are likely to encounter ethical issues related to the use of the promotional strategies selected for marketing research results. The highly questionable tactics of some advertising campaigns, for example, raise serious concerns about the distortion of scientific information. When such factors as questionnaire development and sample size can be easily manipulated to support product claims, the marketplace temptation to misrepresent research can be powerful. But succumbing to that temptation to misrepresent science can result in confusion for the public and a mistrust of science and scientists (Nelkin, 1987).

Marketing strategy selection also raises philosophical questions about the role of science in a democratic society. When scientific breakthroughs can influence stock prices and generate interest in investments, the corporation's proprietary interest in maintaining control over information differs sharply from science's interest in sharing information. Such concern over attempts to limit the discoveries of science was illustrated during the cold fusion controversy when scientists decided to use a press conference instead of a traditional journal publication to announce their findings (Lewenstein, 1991). The secrecy required in defense-related research has generated similar concern about government use of scientific information. For example, the discovery by university scientists that their research on Third World development in the federally supported "Project Camelot" of the 1950s was being used by the military to foment insurrections seriously affected the relations of scientists with government.

Adopting a marketing perspective also exposes the research administrator to ethical dilemmas of a more personal nature. One may, for example, obtain access to inside information or hear rumors of scientific misconduct without having the expertise to critically appraise the situation. If one finds no interest within the organization in dealing with such concerns, the research administrator focused on the external environment may be inclined to convey such information to outsiders such as funding agencies. Such activity is unlikely to endear an administrator to staff researchers, however, especially if the rumors turn out to be unsubstantiated. And even if they are correct, the history of retaliation against "whistle blowers" in industry, government, and universities alike is not encouraging for those who feel ethically bound to act when they perceive abuses of science. In addition, as we have seen recently, the disclosure of ethically questionable conduct can create a marketing nightmare sufficient to bring down the administrations of even the most prestigious universities.

Yet ethics is at the very core of research, for the scientific work done by the few must ultimately be based on the faith of the many. When issues are too complex and abstract

for the average person to comprehend, everything from funding support to consumer acceptance becomes a matter of trust. Consequently, unethical behavior among researchers and administrators threatens the very integrity of science. It is essential for research administrators to be able to keep organizational and personal priorities in perspective, for when the supporters of research lose confidence in what scientists report, science itself is undermined. If one is going to be a member of the scientific community that conducts research—even in an administrative role—one *must* believe that scientific integrity is the highest priority. If economic and market success becomes so attractive that ethics is no longer the top priority, then it may be time to leave the research community and join the business world.

Conclusion

No reputable researcher would think of spending years on a study doomed to fail because of a flawed research design. Yet the lack of an orientation to the external environment of the research organization can doom a study to failure in the marketplace. The failure to be attentive to our changing world can weaken both the validity and generalizability of research results in an increasingly global and multicultural marketplace and society. As a result, new opportunities are emerging for marketing-oriented research administrators who can help translate research findings into quality improvements for industry, financial support for research institutions, and professional growth for themselves.

A recent edition of the *Research Centers Directory* (Hill, 1990) lists more than 12,000 research organizations in the United States. As competition for information increases, those organizations with market-oriented administrators will have a competitive advantage in obtaining funding and moving their research results into the marketplace. But the shift to a market orientation requires a shift in philosophy from a risk-avoiding focus on the control of resources to a risk-taking one. To prepare for this change, experienced research administrators need to acquire new skills in such areas as market analysis and advertising. For those now planning careers in research administration, the shift to a research marketing orientation will require a background in patent law, entrepreneurialism, and strategic marketing. As a result of the development of these new skills, research administrators long accustomed to supporting the creative efforts of others will be able to take a more creative role in defining the future of their institutions.

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