



GUEST EDITORIAL

The road back to relevance

How to put marketing (and marketing scholars) back on the Top Managements' agendas

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Abstract

Purpose – Based upon primary research, the purpose of this paper is to highlight the three main sources of frustration about the marketing scholars' community current status quo. It delivers feasible solutions and describes, using the example of the Special Issue, how to overcome these challenges and provide the research environment all desire.

Design/methodology/approach – Editorial paper summarizing the Special Issue's contributions and observations from the marketing scholar community.

Findings – The three main sources of frustration for marketing scholars about the current system are, first, review and publishing processes, second, the dominant epistemological and methodological approach in academe, encouraging an increasing specialization and reliance on generating more and more quantitatively driven knowledge and finally, the lack of acceptance (and outright disdain) for research with a managerial, applied emphasis.

Practical implications – But it surely is not mission impossible to build the research environment that is wanted. To build the research environment the community desires and to be "back where we belong," to be relevant means the need to do more than just engaging in lip service. Rather than complying with the system causing frustration, the paper asks all to take an active part in the change process. The paper strongly encourages all, as editors, reviewers, colleagues, mentors and supervisors to do so and take some chances. Engage in and support brave research.

Social implications – The authors hope that the paper will stimulate research widely accessible to both managers, and a broader audience. This will eventually lead to a better reputation and public opinion toward marketing scholars and research.

Originality/value – Rather than simply stating the main frustrations of the marketing scholar community, and calling for changes, the authors demonstrate how these challenges can be overcome, and deliver platforms to communicate and lead both the conversation and the actions to achieve the research community most desire.

Keywords Top management, CEO, Relevance, Role of marketing, Marketing scholarship, Strategy, Managerial practice

Paper type Viewpoint

"So, you want us to save marketing? That's it?!" was the eloquent response of one of our contributors, while discussing the aim of our Special Issue. Right in this instance, it struck me. If some of the leading marketing scholars believe we need to be saved, how do managers think about us, the impact of our research, and marketing in general? I have a rather strong, albeit biased view on this, but what were my peers thinking?

The authors would like to thank Tim Keiningham and Thorsten Gruber for their valuable comments on an earlier version of this paper.



Whenever I have an opportunity, I discuss with my colleagues the “status quo” of both marketing and marketing scholarship. Throughout these conversations, three main challenges emerge. First, we, as a community, are often dissatisfied with the current processes allowing us to disseminate our knowledge. The review and publishing processes naturally focus on the elite peer-reviewed journals; this is how one builds a career. Designing research for managers is often (if even) given a low priority particularly at early career stages and perhaps seen as a luxury afforded to those holding a chair. Second, a dominant epistemological and methodological approach in academe encourages an increasing specialization and reliance on generating more and more quantitatively driven knowledge. This, in turn, limits access and understanding by both, the general public, and the very managers we aim to aid with our research. One of our colleagues, asked about his opinion on the status quo of marketing scholarship, gave a rather gloomy outlook about the consequences of these practices. He states that we increasingly know more and more about less and less until we know everything about nothing third, based upon the first two challenges scholars are frustrated about the lack of acceptance (and outright disdain) for research with a managerial, applied emphasis. Nonetheless, we sense a willingness to embrace change evidenced by the number of colleagues raising the issue of practical relevance at conferences while offering potential remedies.

Summarizing these thoughts, we believe it is fair to suggest that there is frustration about the system that we created. The good news is “We created it!” Therefore we can change it, too.

The idea of our Special Issue was sparked by these challenges and our colleagues’ concerns. We wanted not only to discuss them, but also to do something about them. The theme of our issue is how to put marketing back on firms’ strategic agendas.

We conversed with possible contributors, discussing the aim of the issue, and our requirements. The requirements were that, if possible, we want teams of authors – the more diversified, the better. An excellent example of how this was achieved is the international team of Bolton *et al.*, which brings together scholars at different stages of their career and from around the world (i.e. Australia, Europe, Asia and the USA). We did not want our contributors to be straightjacketed by the current dominating style and approach. We incited our contributors to move beyond traditional epistemological and methodological approaches by encouraging conceptual papers and case studies, allowing the authors to tell their story in what they believed to be the most appropriate way to present their insights. No code to crack was the slogan; authors were stimulated to follow their intuition, and if the contribution was there, we included their work. Being provocative was encouraged, and some contributors were surprised if in our reviews we asked them to be more explicit in their implications and criticism rather than “toning it down.” A system of friendly reviews and the free exchange of all papers, in which authors from different teams commented on their contributions, allowed all contributors to not only improve their papers, but also, to include the work of others in their study.

It was a truly collaborative project and we want to thank all the authors for their excellent work: You are the backbone of this issue, and we are delighted and honored to include your excellent work in this issue. I need to mention, however, that this issue would not have been possible without the instrumental help of my colleagues. First, my co-editor Bo Edvardsson. His invaluable guidance, support and ability to convince others of the importance of our issue were vital throughout this journey. Second, we would like to thank Jay Kandampully, editor of *JOSM*. It is not often that

one finds an editor who puts “his money where his mouth is,” giving us the liberties to follow our ambition and create the issue the way we envisioned it. Bo, and I are entirely grateful for this opportunity.

In order to explore how marketing can contribute to the strategic level and support CEOs and the board, we need to explore the current perceptions of strategy, operations and marketing strategy from a company’s point-of-view. To that end, the Special Issue begins with Wirtz *et al.* (2014), who explore the role of marketing in enterprises from both, a managerial and academic viewpoint. Their study establishes how marketing is perceived and develops an “ideal” role of marketing in today’s enterprise. Building on these insights from the company’s internal perceptions of marketing Klaus *et al.* (2014) ask the crucial question this Special Issue revolves around: why does marketing lack strategic importance within companies? Based on their interviews with CEOs the study both confirms our fears of the lack of marketing’s strategic importance, and explores the underlying reasons for this phenomenon. Klaus *et al.* (2014) propose how marketing could indeed build the foundation, and therefore evolve to an integral part of strategy design and development. Payne and Frow (2014) build upon this argument and introduce the development of superior value propositions as a strategic marketing imperative, highlighting the crucial role of the customer in this process. The authors conduct case-based research examining the process by which leading exemplar companies develop their value propositions. Gummesson *et al.* (2014) go a step further by proposing that marketing will inevitably become the core strategy of a company due to the market forces, in particular, the customers’ power base. Gummesson *et al.* (2014) put forward that today’s marketing-oriented supplier is not one who “manages the customer” but one who adapts and supports the market by interacting in a network of relationships on a strategic level. Strandvik *et al.* (2014) support this notion and deliver practical advice on how to achieve buy-in at the Top Management Team level by what one could call “getting back to basics.” Their proposition centers around the issue of how companies can offer something customers will buy, exploring managers’ mental maps. Bolton *et al.* (2014) investigate the customer experience focussed approach in, quite literally, even more detail. They conclude that it is indeed the small details that make a big difference for customers and companies alike, and, in turn, re-elevate marketing back on the CEO’s agenda. Their findings demonstrate the need for radical approaches to truly understand customers. Dixon *et al.* (2014) round up our story by highlighting the strategic role of marketing from a different perspective – the one of successful operations management. By describing crucial operations decisions, they highlight the interdependence of marketing and operations. They conclude that the symbiotic relationship of service marketing and service operations is essential for a firm’s success. As such, they propose an alternative approach through the combination of two functions to put marketing back on the CEO’s agenda.

Based upon our contributor’s inspiring work we strongly believe that there is more than just hope, there is evidence that we as a community have the capabilities to ensure that marketing is on the Top Management Team’s agenda. We intend for this Special Issue to spark the debate for embracing more types of contribution that talk to a larger stakeholder community than merely other academics. Marketing is, fundamentally, about application. Therefore, we as academic community should seek to provide both, guidance and solutions to practitioners. We agree with the meta-theorists Dickhoff *et al.* (1968) and state that marketing research and theory must have an action orientation because it exists “finally for the sake of practice” (p. 199).

We believe the time for change is now, but need to issue fair warning for those that wish to become change agents. This is not a path for the timid. Why? While we are frustrated with the status quo, we have built a system that does not value, publish and build careers from a broadly-based approach to research that talks to managers and academics alike. But it surely is not mission impossible to build the research environment that we all say that we want. To be “back where we belong,” to be relevant means we need to do more than just engaging in lip service. Rather than complying with the system causing our frustration, we ask you to take an active part in the change process. We strongly encourage you all, as editors, reviewers, colleagues, mentors and supervisors to do so and take some chances. Engage in, and support brave research. Even if, or especially if, it does not fit into the current predominant system. After all, as the saying goes, to get to the source one must swim against the stream. A truly inspirational colleague of ours summarized it perfectly by stating that virtually every marketing researcher and practitioner he ever met chose this career path to make a difference. And for the future of marketing, we need to hold fast to these ideals.

So, assist us in not only spreading the word, but also to discuss and execute ideas and actions allowing us to become relevant again. To facilitate these discussions we designed four communication and engagement platforms:

- (1) follow us on Twitter@marketingschola for the latest developments regarding the Special Issue and our agenda;
- (2) engage, comment and contribute to our blog <http://tinyurl.com/marketingschola>
- (3) check out the “behind the scene” videos of Ruth Bolton, Janet McColl-Kennedy, Rohit Verma, Tore Strandvik, Bo Edvardsson and others, sharing their insights on how they developed their contributions for the Special Issue on our designated Youtube channel <http://tinyurl.com/marketingscholar/> and
- (4) join our LinkedIn Group <http://tinyurl.com/marketingscholarsonLinkedIn>

This is a great challenge, perhaps the greatest challenge, we as a community are facing. But, let us be honest. We would not want to have it any other way, would we?

We are looking forward to your thoughts and comments, and hope you enjoy reading our Special Issue.

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