

# Formulating Interesting Research Questions

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I frequently hear lamentations that research appearing in academic journals is not interesting. The reasons advanced include the academic writing style not being interesting and the potential audience for the article being relatively small. There also is widespread criticism of the academic review process, such as:

- Reviewers are overly critical, protect their turf, squelch creative new ideas, and are slow to respond.
- Editors are too conservative, too passive, and reject everything (that I write).

The result is that academic research is perceived as irrelevant and incremental and is rarely read.

It should come as no surprise that the academic review process is viewed as flawed. The evaluation and production of new ideas is, at best, an ill-structured problem, and market failure in this process is universally evident. For example, the television and film industries spend billions to develop, evaluate, and distribute new concepts. Publishers search for promising new authors and manuscripts. Advertisers create new images and messages. The success rate for these various efforts is underwhelming. And we the public see only the small percentage of ideas that survive the review and evaluation process.

The programming of academic research is unique in that the audience for new ideas also plays the role of producer and reviewer. Thus, unlike television programming where my only option is either to watch or not, I read academic journals, participate in the review process, and occasionally contribute content as an author. In all of these capacities, I am excited by research that is interesting, which I define as research that makes a significant contribution to the body of knowledge. Unfortunately, as a reviewer, I frequently read papers that are not interesting, and even the authors are hard-pressed to clearly articulate the study's contribution. Thus, although the review process at many scholarly journals may have deficiencies, an

equal or greater problem is that many of the submissions at these journals fail to make interesting contributions.

With that in mind, I will endeavor to offer suggestions on how to formulate more interesting research questions. The formulation of an interesting research question is a necessary first step to conducting successful research. When this first step is done poorly, the research is doomed to mediocrity. But "being interesting" is a tacit skill that is hard to define or teach (see Davis 1971; Zaltman, LeMasters, and Heffering 1982). We easily recognize when something is interesting (and even more easily when it is not!), but it is difficult to articulate what makes something interesting.

Figure 1 offers a framework for identifying interesting research questions that has been adapted from Henderson and Clark's (1990) framework for defining innovation. This framework identifies two distinct dimensions of innovation and proposes a  $2 \times 2$  matrix that yields four types of innovation in marketing research. In the sections that follow, I will describe each type of innovation and offer examples from creative fields and from marketing research. The accompanying discussion suggests that

- *incremental innovation* in marketing research is inherently less interesting and less likely to make a contribution significant enough to warrant publication in a top academic journal;
- *modular and architectural innovations* in marketing research produce a large number of the interesting studies that are published in top academic journals; and
- *radical innovation*, while inherently interesting, is rare and difficult to implement for all but the most skillful researchers.

## **INCREMENTAL INNOVATION IN MARKETING RESEARCH**

According to Henderson and Clark (1990), incremental innovation "refines and extends an established design. Improvement occurs in individual components, but the

**FIGURE 1**  
**A Framework for Formulating Interesting Marketing Research Questions**

<i>Linkages Between Core Concepts</i>	<i>Core Concepts</i>	
	<i>Reinforced</i>	<i>Changed</i>
Same	<p><i>Incremental Innovation in Marketing Research</i>            Replicate results for the focal relationship(s)            Replicate results for the focal relationship(s) and extend by adding peripheral construct(s)</p>	<p><i>Modular Innovation in Marketing Research</i>            Define, measure, or analyze one or more core constructs in a new way</p>
Different	<p><i>Architectural Innovation in Marketing Research</i>            Examine a new situation or context in which the nature of the focal relationship(s) may be different            Examine the role of a new construct that may moderate the nature of the focal relationship(s)</p>	<p><i>Radical Innovation in Marketing Research</i>            Introduce a new conceptualization that replaces and changes how we think of the old constructs and relationship(s)</p>

underlying core design concepts, and the links between them, remain the same” (p. 11). In the world of theater, incremental innovation occurs each time a classic play (e.g., Shakespeare) is remounted with different directors and actors interpreting the motivations behind each character. These nuances may produce new insights into the relationships between characters, even though the prescribed nature of the relationships in the script (father, sister, lover, etc.) remains unchanged. In marketing research, incremental innovation takes the form of replication studies that also may extend the examination to include additional peripheral constructs.

Incremental innovation has its place in academic research, but it is inherently less interesting than more innovative research and offers relatively little contribution to new knowledge. As such, incremental research has a lower probability of being published in a top academic journal. Stewart (2002) ranks insufficient contribution as the single most common reason for rejection at the *Journal of Marketing*. Producing more interesting research requires new relationships, situations, contexts, or constructs that change our current understanding of the phenomenon. This can be accomplished by implementing either architectural or modular innovations in marketing research.

### ARCHITECTURAL INNOVATION IN MARKETING RESEARCH

With architectural innovation, the core concepts of the system remain the same but new interactions and linkages between the components are introduced (Henderson and Clark 1990). Architectural innovation is the norm in situation comedies, where core characters interact in new situations each week. In marketing research, architectural innovation involves identifying moderating or boundary conditions that produce new meaning or insights for the focal relationships. Contextual variables such as industry

conditions may moderate relationships of interest in strategy research. Individual-difference variables or purchase situations may moderate relationships of interest in consumer research. Research examining these moderating conditions or constructs deepens our understanding of the complexity of the relationships examined.

Consider, for example, research examining price-quality-value relationships. Perceived value is generally thought to be a negative function of price and a positive function of quality, so that yet another study supporting these relationships is generally uninteresting. Studies that examine moderating conditions for the price-quality-value relationships are far more interesting. Some of the more interesting research on product value of the last two decades has examined how price and value perceptions vary based on changes in reference price across individuals or across contexts (e.g., Niedrich, Sharma, and Wedell 2001; Thaler 1985). These findings suggest that the value calculation formula changes but that the relationship between price and value remains negative.

There also exists conceptual support for a positive relationship between price and perceived value (or demand) in some contexts and within some range of prices, a phenomenon referred to as a Geffen good in the economics literature. These represent boundary conditions for the price-value relationship, where the relationship changes from negative to positive. But there is little empirical research in marketing that supports the existence of these conditions. An empirical study that illuminates the conditions under which the price-value relationship is actually positive would be inherently interesting.

The other side of the value equation suggests that quality or performance assessments are positively linked to value. There has been a healthy debate as to whether examining the process by which consumers relate perceptions to expectations enhances our understanding of value or satisfaction formation, but at some point, this debate becomes less interesting. A more interesting research question is under what conditions or for which market

segments might we find that exceeding quality expectations leads to lower value perceptions. This would suggest that expectations can act as a classic rather than infinite ideal point (e.g., Teas 1993). Thus, while the price-quality-value relationship is an interesting story, additional meaning is provided by examining constructs or contexts that interact with the focal constructs to produce new meaning or insights.

### MODULAR INNOVATION IN MARKETING RESEARCH

Modular innovation involves replacing one or more core concepts without changing the system's architecture (Henderson and Clark 1990). For example, the basic story, focal characters, and relationships in *West Side Story* are largely the same as in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, but moving the story from sixteenth-century Italy to twentieth-century New York changes the core theme from family hatred to racism in America. In marketing research, modular innovation occurs when the conceptual system of relationships remains unchanged but one or more of the focal constructs are defined, measured, or analyzed in a new way. This shift in measurement or analysis extends our understanding of the nature of the focal relationships by examining them through a different lens.

For example, most marketers accept that favorable consumer performance assessments lead to satisfaction and repurchase intentions, and additional studies confirming these links offer relatively little new knowledge. Two recent studies made significant contributions to the satisfaction literature by changing methods of measurement or analysis. Mittal and Kamakura (2001) replicated earlier studies demonstrating a link between satisfaction and repurchase intentions, but they also implemented a modular innovation by exploring the nature of the link between satisfaction and actual repurchase behavior. Fournier and Mick (1999) used a phenomenological approach to examine the extant consumer satisfaction paradigm and produced new insights by changing the method of measurement and the level of analysis.

There are other examples of modular innovation that change the level of analysis. Most quality or satisfaction research has been conducted at the individual level of theory and measurement with the analyses and findings generalized to some aggregate population of customers. Recent studies have moved the level of theory and analysis from the individual customer to the level of the firm, in an attempt to determine the long-term value to the company of delivering quality to its customers (e.g., Rust, Zahorik, and Keiningham 1995). Other research has examined the relationship between the quality of goods and services and the performance of entire industries, economic sectors, and national economies (e.g., Fornell, Johnson, Anderson,

Cha, and Bryant 1996). This type of research requires an understanding of the issues and challenges associated with cross-level research (see Klein, Dansereau, and Hall 1994 for a discussion of levels issues).

The Marketing Science Institute's recent competition on Linking Marketing to Financial Performance and Firm Value can be seen as a stimulus for modular innovation. The purpose of the competition was to stimulate empirical research examining links between marketing activities and financial performance. Winners of the competition linked customer satisfaction and shareholder value (Anderson, Fornell, and Mazvancheryl 2002), competitive strategies, advertising, personal sales and return on investment (Chintagunta and Desiraju 2002), and branding strategy and intangible firm value (Rao, Agarwal, and Dahlhoff 2002). In each instance, marketers generally would agree that the focal construct (e.g., customer satisfaction, advertising, branding strategy) should be related to firm performance, so the primary contribution of the winning research was the explicit use of financial outcome variables rather than, for example, managers' subjective assessments of firm performance. The research offers new insights by defining, measuring, and analyzing focal concepts in new ways.

### RADICAL INNOVATION IN MARKETING RESEARCH

Radical innovation creates a dominant new design that incorporates links between new core concepts (Henderson and Clark 1990). About a decade ago, the publishing industry introduced a radical innovation in the form of "books on tape." This innovation changes how consumers interact with their books (listening rather than reading), and it changes how books are designed, produced, and packaged. In marketing research, radical innovation produces a paradigm shift that introduces new constructs that both replace and change how we think of the focal relationships.

As in most contexts, radical innovation in marketing research occurs infrequently, and it is a somewhat arbitrary designation. One candidate for radical innovation designation in marketing research is the concept of relationship marketing. Initially introduced into the services marketing literature (Berry 1983), relationship marketing has influenced or subsumed research in consumer behavior, customer satisfaction, channel management, direct marketing, database marketing, frequency marketing, Internet marketing, and nonprofit marketing. Relationship marketing is now a dominant theme in marketing research (Stewart 2002).

Several characteristics of radical innovation are worth noting. Radical innovation is a chaotic process subject to high failure rates. Doing it well requires tacit knowledge

that is developed through experience. The greatest challenge in executing radical innovation in marketing research may be in crafting the final manuscript because articulating a compelling story is difficult when standards and benchmarks are ambiguous or do not exist. Publishing creative and radical new ideas ultimately requires excellent communication (i.e., marketing) skills.

Fortunately for those of us who lack the genius for conducting successful, radical innovation in marketing research, the widespread acceptance of radical innovation occurs slowly so that advantages do not necessarily accrue to first-movers. After a radical innovation has been accepted, there are bountiful opportunities for later entrants to implement modular and architectural innovation.

## FINAL COMMENTS

I have only recently begun to ask of my research, is it really interesting? Or how can I make it more interesting? These questions prompted this attempt to frame and articulate ways to produce more interesting research. I look forward to testing these ideas in my own research and to discovering additional perspectives on how to formulate more interesting research questions. In the meantime, I hope these thoughts offer some insight into the challenges that we all face in our attempts to produce interesting research that makes a significant contribution. Good luck to us all!

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