Serving the Marketing Discipline Through Journal Reviews

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Over the years, many graduate students and several colleagues have asked me about my approach to journal reviewing. In the course of these conversations, typically someone asks why I do it, and so I have had to reflect on this question. Students are quick to see that journal reviewing incurs significant costs. Considerable time and energy go into making sense of an article that you have not seen before and to figure out what suggestions will best serve the editor and the author(s). A reviewer accepts a certain amount of professional risk by making recommendations, knowing that an editor, other reviewers, and author(s) will see your rationale and may not agree with it. Furthermore, there are few extrinsic rewards to reviewing. In fact, not many people know much about what you have done as a reviewer or its impact. So, why take on the challenge?

Fortunately, there are counterbalancing benefits to journal reviewing, most of which are intrinsic. The ones that work for me include the opportunity to participate in the process by which the marketing discipline determines knowledge contributions, the satisfaction of knowing that you helped a journal enhance its stature in the discipline, the chance to help an editor and manuscript author(s) be successful, and the personal recognition received from the discipline community. These benefits typically outweigh the costs. Interestingly, all except the last of these motivations involve a reviewer serving others. That observation encouraged me to think about the review as a product intended to serve multiple customers. This analogy seems appropriate for someone who has spent a career in marketing, and I would like to reflect on it.

CUSTOMER-ORIENTED REVIEWING FOR JOURNALS

As a reviewer for scholarly journals, I consider three primary customers for a manuscript review: the journal editor, manuscript author(s), and the marketing discipline. Each of these customers has unique as well as overlapping needs for a review product. For example, a journal editor-as-customer must make manuscript accept/reject decisions and through accepted manuscripts enhance the scholarly reputation of the journal among its constituents. The author-as-customer wants to publish the manuscript in the journal. Both of these customers have a common need to improve the manuscript, consistent with the quality/rigor standards of the journal. Fortunately, a reviewer can go to any of several articles for guidelines on how to serve the needs of an editor and authors (e.g., Summers 2001; Varadarajan 1996). Such articles typically discuss criteria for evaluating manuscripts and for getting manuscripts accepted.

However, little has been said about the third customer, the discipline served by the journal, and how the discipline's needs might affect the reviewer's task. Of course, one might argue that the editor and author(s) represent the discipline, making it unnecessary for the reviewer to think about the discipline's needs. However, some of the more interesting issues with which I have wrestled as a reviewer are related to discipline-as-customer needs that go beyond the obvious ones of editor and author(s). For this reason, I would like to devote the remainder of this essay to thoughts about the marketing discipline-as-customer for scholarly journal reviewers.

THE DISCIPLINE-AS-CUSTOMER ISSUES FOR REVIEWERS

For me, the most important motivation for devoting time and energy to journal reviewing lies in the opportunity to meet the marketing discipline's needs for growth in and usefulness of the body of marketing knowledge. Yet, trying to meet such needs, as an individual reviewer, may be fraught with peril. Some things have been addressed by the discipline, at least implicitly, as indicated by prior published articles, and really are beyond the purview of the reviewer to debate. For example, the marketing discipline

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has judged many broad topic areas as within its domain and important (e.g., advertising effectiveness, consumer satisfaction theory, marketing decision models, etc.). Consequently, I resist the temptation to make judgments about the relative importance of such topics in order to guard against personal bias stemming from my own preferred research topics.

The same can be said for methodologies that are generally accepted by the marketing discipline. For example, a reviewer who conducts qualitative research within a phenomenology tradition may be tempted to make value judgments about personally nonpreferred methods even though the discipline considers them acceptable for addressing the research question (e.g., ethnographic or grounded theory methods). In general, a reviewer should guard against letting personal topical or method preferences influence a review, although sometimes this is easier said than done.

Some discipline-related issues are more difficult, primarily because the discipline has not adequately and explicitly addressed them. In these cases, a reviewer cannot look to prior publication for guidance. Let me use my own situation as an example. As a journal reviewer, the discipline-as-customer issues with which I wrestle typically arise because the editor selects me as a reviewer for a particular manuscript largely based on my having a related area of expertise. For example, I often am asked to review articles that report on qualitative research. So, I tend to think about the needs of the marketing discipline within the context of qualitative research contributions. Over time, and as a consequence of my opportunity to observe many manuscripts, I have developed a perspective on the discipline's needs related to qualitative research, and I find myself asking the question, "Should I, as a reviewer, craft reviews for editors and authors with these needs in mind?" Usually, the answer is not clear because of the complexity of the issue, although eventually I have to take a stand.

I want to consider three examples of such issues about which I have thought. Each deals with a different need of the marketing discipline, namely, the need for different types of knowledge, the need for rigorously developed knowledge, and the need for experienced researchers to produce knowledge products. Each of these broad needs can be conceived within the context of qualitative research contributions to the marketing body of knowledge.

Need for Different Types of Knowledge

Part of what I bring to the review process is my belief that our discipline needs more effort devoted to generating its own theories of marketing phenomena. This belief is well supported in the marketing discipline's literature, as many published articles call for new theory development. But, should I let this belief influence my reviews of theoretical manuscripts? My answer has been a qualified yes, qualified because there are limits as to how I should do it. For example, I should not use different standards for accepting theory generation manuscripts than for other kinds of research. Similarly, I do not think I should spend more time or effort on a review of a theory manuscript than on other kinds of manuscripts.

I try to deal with this need by offering specific kinds of encouragement about the importance of theory generation to authors who report on such research. Maybe that just means noting the importance of developing theory on the author's chosen phenomenon. Or it could mean sharing theoretical and/or methodological ideas that may improve the contribution of the manuscript. I could meet my obligations as a reviewer without doing either, but the theory needs of the marketing discipline encourage me to take the time and effort to do both. So far, no one has objected to these review tactics, probably because they are viewed as consistent with being author friendly.

Need for Rigorous Research

A second, more complicated example concerns the marketing discipline's need for rigorous research, regardless of the approach used in the research on which a manuscript reports. The specific issue that I raise illustrates a case where I believe a reviewer can individually go against the prevailing manuscript review practice, simply because rigor of research in general is an important, accepted need of a discipline.

I am most likely to think about the need for rigor when I review a manuscript that reports on theoretical research using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Implicitly, the marketing discipline encourages mixed-method research, so it is easy to judge this feature of the manuscript as a strength. However, too often in such manuscripts, the methods used to guide the qualitative study design, to collect the data, and to interpret meaning are hardly mentioned. It is as if the author(s) think that preliminary qualitative research need not be rigorous or assessed for rigor. Prior publications are not of much guidance, because mixed-method manuscripts tend to get published based almost entirely on the rigor of the quantitative portion of the research. Consequently, the discipline implicitly accepts qualitative research of unknown rigor in such manuscripts.

I have wrestled with this issue by asking, "Should I, as a journal reviewer, accept this state of affairs?" Over time, I concluded that the answer is "no." I feel an obligation to the marketing discipline to be demanding of rigorous qualitative research in mixed-method manuscripts. But, how should I do it constructively? I typically raise the rigor issue and ask the author(s) to discuss the methodology used to conduct the qualitative portion of their research. Even here, I look for guidance from generally accepted practice within qualitative research. For instance, the literature argues persuasively that assessment of rigor should be done within the bounds of the qualitative approach selected by the author, using whatever criteria have been offered and generally accepted by the practitioners of that approach. I try to follow this guideline.

Need for Experienced Researchers

My last, and perhaps most controversial, example comes from reviewing manuscripts that rely on a literature-driven methodology to generate theory. Such manuscripts typically use literature references and logic to derive theoretical propositions or hypotheses about a phenomenon. Too often, the author(s) never explicitly discuss their own firsthand experience with that phenomenon. For example, no mention is made of the author(s)' personal experience with the phenomenon, prior qualitative research, or any other of their related research. Perhaps the double-blind review process hides the fact that the author(s) have such experience, although I think there are ways to indicate such experience in the manuscript without revealing author identity. The cases that worry me most are those where the author(s) really do not have firsthand experience with the phenomenon. Virtually all they know about the phenomenon is what they have read about it. What should I, as a reviewer, do in this case?

Clearly, the literature of a discipline is a major, critical source for theoretical insight. Our discipline generally agrees on this point, and I concur. However, should the discipline expect that a researcher bring firsthand experience with the phenomenon to theory generation research? I doubt if there is a generally accepted position at the level of the discipline on this question. On one hand, the qualitative research literature argues that firsthand experience with a phenomenon can and will affect a researcher's interpretations of literature. Some members of the marketing discipline probably view such interpretations as desirable. However, others, for objectivity reasons, may not agree. Unfortunately, the marketing discipline does not offer generally accepted guidance on how a reviewer should respond to a manuscript seemingly devoid of firsthand experience, and a reviewer may have to improvise.

In this case, it seems reasonable to me that the discipline's need for rigorous knowledge contributions should encourage me to raise the issue with the editor and author(s). I have taken this stance in reviews by asking that a manuscript revision provide discussion of the author(s)' firsthand experience with the phenomenon being studied. If the author(s) do have firsthand experience, I would like to see the manuscript discuss how this experience influenced interpretations of the literature. If the author(s) interpreted the literature without having any firsthand experience, I would like the editor and other reviewers to know that, and if the manuscript eventually gets published, the article readers as well.

COMMUNICATING DISCIPLINE-AS-CUSTOMER ISSUES IN REVIEWING

Variation among reviewers on such discipline-as-customer issues seems certain. In fact, an editor may welcome such variation because it may provide different perspectives on the contribution of a manuscript. In the absence of such variation, an editor may unwittingly accept a lower quality manuscript. For example, suppose a manuscript's reviewers jointly are not sensitive to the marketing discipline's need for rigorous qualitative research, especially when it is part of a mixed-method research design. They may recommend acceptance of a manuscript solely because of the rigor of the quantitative research component. However, no one would know whether the theory and/or interpretation of its verification tests could have been more insightful if the author had been compelled to conduct and report on rigorous preliminary qualitative research. Of course, the editor may raise the issue even if the reviewers do not, but that just shifts more of the reviewing responsibility to the editor.

When a reviewer believes that a discipline-as-customer issue is important, the review should comment on it. Then the editor, author, and other reviewers can jointly decide if or how the issue should be addressed in a manuscript. If the same issue keeps coming up over time, perhaps a discussion at an editorial review board meeting may resolve the issue and create more desirable, known consistency among reviewers. Or, incorporating a position on the issue in the editor's guidelines to reviewers could serve the same purpose. This kind of variance reduction among reviewers can benefit the marketing discipline. Such steps focus on evolving the standards by which a manuscript's contribution to marketing knowledge is judged by the review process.

CONCLUDING COMMENT

Reviewers for scholarly journals provide an enormously important service to the marketing discipline. A reviewer contributes with each manuscript reviewed by meeting the needs of the journal editor and the manuscript author(s). At the same time, a reviewer may be in a position to address longer-run needs of a discipline beyond those of the editor and author(s). By thinking about one's experience with many manuscripts, a reviewer may see tendencies and trends in manuscripts that affect the discipline. When such tendencies suggest longer-run problems or issues affecting the nature and quality of research published in a journal, what should a reviewer do? A reviewer may do nothing, of course, beyond raising the issue in the manuscript at hand. However, there is an opportunity to take a more proactive stance by crafting reviews over time to consistently deal with the issue, as well as raising the longer-run implications of the issue with an editor or editorial board. In this way, a reviewer may actually help to influence the longer-run standards by which manuscripts are judged for contribution of new knowledge to the discipline, and that can be a rewarding service contribution to a journal.

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