David Carson

Faculty of Business and Management, University of Ulster, Northern Ireland, UK

A Comment on: The Commodification of Marketing Knowledge

Introduction

For many years now, the more enlightened academics in marketing have been questioning the role of "academic" marketing and the processes and systems the profession employs in disseminating knowledge. I sincerely hope that by formalizing the debate in a special issue of a respected academic journal in marketing, there will be a significant groundswell of interest which will in turn lead to innovative thought and ideas.

I am pleased to be asked to contribute to this debate at this early stage. My response that follows discusses some of the issues raised by both Brownlie and Saren (this issue) and by Baker (this issue). Broadly, I can say at this stage that I am in agreement with most of the sentiments discussed in the two papers. Indeed, I have engaged in enjoyable and thought-provoking dialogue with the authors' in the recent past and it is pleasing to see these issues being outlined here. For what it is worth, I offer my opinion on the "key players" surrounding this debate and hope that my views will add to and perhaps generate further discussion in the future.

The Evolving Market for Marketing Knowledge

I wonder how dedicated the market is for marketing knowledge. Certainly, there is a growing and increasingly sophisticated market for knowledge per se. Whether there is such a growing market for marketing knowledge I am still to be convinced. Regarding marketing, there is no doubt in my mind that people, consumers in the broadest sense, are interested in it as a topic, indeed this interest is reflected in the number of comments from a wide variety of sources about aspects of the discipline. I think it is important to acknowledge that people do not necessarily need or even want to gain a knowledge of marketing or to actively seek information about marketing.

With regards to the dissemination of marketing knowledge and the "apparent" infringements upon the purity of such knowledge suggested by Brownlie and Saren, as academics we must guard against suppressing natural and inherent aspects of marketing philosophy. In particular, good marketing thrives upon "change and variety", therefore, new and different messages and mediums should be welcomed without over-evaluation by the academic establishment or any interested body for that manner. Whether there is sufficient progress into an innovative future is open to
debate and interpretation. However, most aspects of life and progress move into the future in small steps which build upon the best of the past.

Similarly, as the discipline matures there is an inevitable strengthening of established "conformity" which is manifest in terms of writing style which in turn will follow "fashions" which are acceptable, indeed, expected by the profession. As interest in the profession expands, of course, there will be copying of mainstream ideas. In the academic market, the practice of "covering" these mainstream ideas for different market segments is widespread, but it seems to me this is healthy and normal practice which is accepted in other industries and professions, (for example, the music industry), as both interpretive, developmental, creative and innovative practice.

Therefore, my conclusion on the evolving market for marketing knowledge is that the trends alluded to by Brownlie and Saren are in the main to be welcomed as a natural change dimension which is indicative of a healthy and vibrant profession. Perhaps the academic profession should come to terms with the fact that they no longer have carte blanche control and influence over marketing information and that they may have to reposition themselves within a wider framework.

The Ends of Marketing Authors and Authority/Unintended Consequences

Following from the point made above, and agreeing with Brownlie and Saren that marketing academics are "...only one of many different voices...", I am prompted to ask the question, Why should marketing academics always be, or want to be, in an exalted position? Marketing as a profession in particular, is about communication, therefore, anybody's comments should be welcomed as a contribution towards such communication. Equally, marketing is inherently about consumers, therefore, consumers have a right to comment and such comment should be welcomed. Also, marketing as a profession involves a wide body of practitioners who have grown and developed within the profession, and these people have an experiential knowledge which should not be spurned, on the contrary their opinions should be encouraged and valued.

A characteristic of all of the above purveyors of knowledge and communication is that their comments are essentially free of the shackles of "correctness". This is not the case with academic communication of knowledge. The academic profession has indeed climbed into a straitjacket of constrictive correctness whereby any communication must have a foundation of recognition of prior thought and a rigour of performance which stifles opinion and creative thought. I am not necessarily against such foundation and rigour. There is a lot to commend the practice of presenting ideas and thought that stems from and develops that which has gone before. Without such foundation, academics would be in danger of expressing nothing more than opinion, a commodity which is not in short supply amongst academics, but such opinion would be foisted upon a wider audience which may be less capable or able to discern or evaluate whether such opinions are good or bad.

However, I do agree with the sentiments of Sawchuck (1994), that the foundation and rigour of academic knowledge dissemination has lost its way and is performed for other pragmatic purposes rather than healthy communication of discerning thought. There is no doubt in my mind that the dissemination of academic
marketing knowledge has become flawed, staid, unimaginative and strategically misguided.

Generally though, I relate very much with the sentiments of Brownlie and Saren when they state that "...there is a host of different forms of marketing knowledge, each produced by a variety of distinct signifying practices; and that the world of marketing is ... big enough to accommodate all of them".

On the question of the academic peer group assessment and review process, I have a high regard for the rigour and subsequent outcomes of this process. In almost every case, I believe that an academic paper will be better for going through the process. What other profession "polices" itself with such voluntary rigour? The (generally) constructive criticism that academic knowledge is subjected to allows the author to expand upon his/her description and to break free from the confines of their self-centred thought processes. However, I do criticize, strongly, the current frameworks upon which academic peer review is now built. The strict and mundane adherence to literature foundation and empirical evidence does indeed, in my view restrict creative and innovative thought development.

How does the academic profession break free from the restrictive frameworks it has built for itself? I would propose a "new era" review process whereby academic reviewers stand up and declare themselves to be advocates of innovative and creative thought. Editors too, might champion new parameters whereby articles must be innovative and creative. This does not necessarily mean ignoring the best of history and previous thought, indeed there should be clear acknowledgement of the "accepted" past, but there should also be an emphasis on a new dimension which either challenges, refines or rejects the old order.

So much for my self-indulgent ramblings, give an academic the forum...! What are my responses to the specific issues posed by Brownlie and Saren. It will be obvious from many of my comments above that I agree with the genre and tone of the issues. Specifically, I am happy to make the following statements:

— The Journal Editor, who might reflect on the comments about the poverty of new ideas coming forward in marketing and the position of journals. As a Journal Editor I do indeed often reflect on the "poverty" of new ideas coming forward. Where are the new ideas? Very few authors have genuinely new ideas. Most authors are comfortable and safe with the mainstream uncontroversial thought patterns. Authors do not want to be unconventional, in fact I would contend that most are afraid of being unconventional. As regards a journal’s position, I would acknowledge that it would be difficult to reposition established journals, although there is scope for occasional dalliance in innovative debate (this special issue is point in example). However, there is ample opportunity for any new journal to be positioned directly into an innovative track. Indeed, there is some evidence of this occurring in new journals attempting to span the academic and practitioner views as their main focus of attention.

— The Reviewer of papers and books, who might consider the paucity of new ideas, but who might also comment on the genre of writing and representation in marketing literature. I have already commented on this issue above. However, I would reiterate that reviewers need to break free from the "straitjacket" of conformity. They need to, in fact should, be encouraged and applauded, to take an open-minded view about new ideas and be positive and
receptive to innovative thought. They should look for creative, confident and opinionated writing.

— The marketing Guru: how are they made and marketed to achieve source credibility? I believe that marketing suffers from the breadth and scope of the discipline. However, it is a maturing discipline and its standing is increasing amongst its own professional fraternity. The marketing discipline does not need to pre-occupy itself with whether other disciplines accept its scholarly standing. Let the performance speak for itself, if the perception is bad, then it is marketing’s fault and it is the marketing profession that is best equipped to redress such a perception.

— As for the guru’s, all professions produce guru’s from time to time, but most of the time the opinion formers, players and performers are many and varied. I see such a circumstance as healthy and not dependent upon a few people (guru’s). The scope and variety of the marketing discipline can be exploited if properly harnessed.

The practitioner already acquires and retains experiential knowledge. The opportunity to accelerate this process is there today and will increase in the future. Similarly, journalists and publishers are already re-packaging and popularizing marketing ideas for greater accessibility. Increasing competition will ensure that this process continues, indeed, it might be argued that this is the area which is displaying most innovation and creativity. Academic marketers could learn from people in these domains.

I would conclude therefore, that the academic marketing profession, in trying to enhance its standing and rigour has stifled its own progression and development. It is currently working against the natural maxims of marketing philosophy which is about innovation, change and discovery of new ideas and new ways of doing things. The wider profession of marketing is comfortable with these maxims and therefore is prepared to speak loudly and more often about what it is doing and is happy to be opinionated. Again I say, the academic marketing profession could learn from its wider community.

References


