Interview With Richard Staelin
July 11th 1998, Fontainebleau, France

To learn about his experiences as past Editor of Marketing Science, we interviewed Rick Staelin. At the INSEAD Marketing Science Conference, we used a reverse-focus-group-type format with multiple interviewers [co-editors Shantanu Dutta, Paul Messinger, and Peter Popkowski Leszczyk] converging with questions on one respondent. Here are excerpts from that conversation.

What made you want to be Editor?

Rick Staelin: A key reason for my taking on this position was to make an impact on the field. I think it is also true for prior editors of Marketing Science.

My definition of impact is to make papers more readable, more relevant and more insightful—getting authors to focus on the key ideas they have, at times pushing them harder than what they would like to be pushed. Push a person to their limits to get the best they can get. You see a paper with potential and want to improve the paper. However, this can lead to meddling in the process and may even degrade the paper. I have been very conscious of this problem and likelihood of a type 1 or type 2 error.

A number of people have come up to me and said that they liked the process and the modifications that occurred during the review process improved the paper. However, these are usually authors whose papers have been accepted. One does not hear from authors whose papers have been rejected. It would be good to also hear from authors who feel that the review process was not helpful and may have even hurt the quality of their paper. I encourage these authors to send specific comments on how the review process was not conducive to improving the quality of the manuscript. Negative feedback can also be helpful to an editor.

Do you think that authors whose papers have been rejected would feel free to raise this issue?

Rick Staelin: I can tell you from my experience that when authors complained about the process I never held it against them. I always looked at their complaints and often put the manuscript back in the review process. I am so deeply involved in the process that if you ask me who are the people who complained and the nature of their complaint, I would not be able to recount much about who they are or the complaint. It is just that there are so many things to do that I just cannot pay attention to individual personalities.

Do you have a step by step approach that authors should take before they submit their manuscripts?

Rick Staelin: Let me take a broader approach to address this question. One of the weaknesses of our profession, unlike economics and finance, is that we do not normally take papers on "road trips." In economics and finance papers have been presented at a number of workshops at other universities, and they have had an opportunity to get comments from a number of peers. In our profession, journals often receive manuscripts that have not been presented at any workshops and hence have not had the opportunity of getting comments from peers. It is important for all authors to get peer reviews within their school and/or from other researchers interested in their area of research. Also, you can send your manuscripts for comments to outside researchers. Pick people you know and can ask at a personal level. If you send it to well-known scholars, remember they get several manuscripts from others and may not have time to read your manuscript unless you know them personally and you can make a personal request. However, it is critical that you have a peer review and
possibly a road trip with your paper before you submit it to a journal like *Marketing Science*. The likelihood of papers that have not had any peer review surviving the review process is, in my opinion, lower than the average of about 15 percent.

Another issue is the length of the manuscript. I don’t think that a paper over 60 pages will be reviewed favorably. On the other hand it is possible to have 35-40 pages of text and 10 pages of tables, if the paper is addressing a complex and important topic. I personally think that one paper which has a lot of content is better than two light papers. But on the other hand I had a recent experience where the author’s original submission made one very good point and a number of ancillary points. The paper was 35 pages, but I decided that it did not have content for 35 pages. It had one very neat point, and it could be made in 20 pages, and that is what I suggested, and it is a very neat paper. The authors may not be happy at this outcome but I think the readers will be.

Finally, the editor is always worried about the length to contribution ratio. So make sure that you have a favorable ratio. You want to increase your chances of getting a chance to respond which means trying to get through the first round (under my tenure I was rejecting two thirds of the manuscript received after the first round). So do not send the paper till you have had some peer review and/or road show, to increase its chances.

What should authors do after they receive the first round reviews?

*Rick Staelin*: When you get the reviews back, partition the comments into different groups. Some reviewers’ comments arise because they are confused and are seeking clarification. Others will be extraneous to the paper and may reflect the reviewer’s tastes. A third group reflects genuine limitations of the manuscript and/or suggestions on how to improve the paper. While you should respond to all legitimate concerns, and try to address them, you should have the guts to tell the Editor that certain points are extraneous and not relevant to the point you are making. A diligent reviewer spends 15-16 hours on a paper. A diligent area editor spends 8 hrs and a diligent editor spends 2-4 hours on the paper. The authors, however, have usually spent far longer in this process, so they have a right to enter into an intellectual debate on this review process and not be a sycophant.

The paper should not be written for the reviewers and the editor. At times I see manuscripts where authors try to respond to all reviewer comments, and, in the process, the paper becomes harder to read. Write a letter to the editor: say that it should not be passed on to the reviewer, and mention why you are not addressing all the points.

Having said that, all reviewer comments contains some information. If the reviewer is confused, the readers may be confused. So look at the reviews carefully to see if you have confused the reader.

After having looked at the reviews carefully and [having] thought about them, if you feel that you should communicate with the editor before you proceed, then do so very clearly and precisely. [Use] not more than 3 pages, and preferably a page. Email the editor and/or write to the editor, but do not call up the editor. Often you are fighting over one or two points. If you are fighting over 10 points, the paper is either in real trouble or you may have not fully grasped the reviewer comments.

If you really believe that the review process has come to the wrong conclusion on one or two key issues which can be addressed or need clarification, then write an unemotional letter specifying them to the editor and the reviewer and they will respond.
Should the reviewer responses be long or short?

Rick Staelin: Oh, short. When I see a thirty page paper with a forty page reviewer response, I throw up. About two to three pages is sufficient. A reviewer might write 3-4 pages, but when you think what was reviewer B really concerned about—maybe he was worried that you did not incorporate competition or unobserved variables—then just take these two key issues and address them in detail.

A good response to the reviewer is to say, reading your comments, these 2 or 3 issues seem to be the major concerns. Then there may be a bunch of other smaller issues which you can say were handled, or refer to the page where addressed. Sometimes certain reviewer comments may no longer be relevant since you have cut back that section.

Sometimes reviewers may not be convinced about certain derivations, [how should authors respond]?

Sometimes reviewers have concern about some derivation. In that case you can provide a special technical appendix for the reviewer. However, with Mathematica and other such programs, it may become less and less relevant to ask for such details, since we should assume that the derivation is done correctly, or checked through Mathematica.

But it is incumbent on the authors to make clear all the steps, so as to make replication easy. For anything published in Marketing Science, readers should assume that the technical details are not wrong.

Empirical analyses are often different, and often difficult to check, [what issues arise then]? How about requiring authors to provide the data to make replication easy, as is often the case in statistics journal?

Rick Staelin: With the large data set and the specific programs which are written for them, especially ones with unobserved heterogeneity, it would be very difficult to check. Those programs are often very user-unfriendly. It is an issue, but in the short run we cannot get it checked before publication.

Should we require that authors provide the programs or the data they have used to the review process?

Rick Staelin: The former is necessary. The authors have to make clear what programs they are relying on and the details. With respect to data, often the data is confidential and has been disguised and the editorial process has allowed them to do so. So if we insist on data specifics, we may not get manuscripts that are dealing with interesting and relevant questions to marketers. So I think we have to allow this for now.

During your tenure did you feel that there were topics that were important, but for which you did not see enough papers?

Rick Staelin: There were a series of papers where my initial reaction was to reject the paper because the papers were clearly below the standard of Marketing Science. However, the topics were really relevant. There were approximately 10 papers where I said to the authors that I really like the topic, and that I was giving them a second chance. Of those, 2-3 were published, so clearly the Area Editor and the Editor were proactive and helped facilitate a process that led to a publication. I guess that is the prerogative of the Editor.

I couldn't say that we ignored topics during my tenure . . . . I am surprised that in this conference there is no session on managerial decision-making for organizations. There is a special issue on Managerial Decision-Making, so we will see what comes of it.

Do you think that some of these papers that you were more proactive on will have an impact and also generate new research areas?

Rick Staelin: It is a bit early [to tell], but we are seeing some of these papers referenced now. Going back to the issue of impact, the reason I played a more pro-active role in the review process was to ensure that each of those published by Marketing Science would have an impact. If I just wanted to be efficient, then I could have just followed up with reviewers and area editors to keep the process moving and accepted papers if we had enough of a reviewer buy in.

I think that by taking a proactive stance and looking for important papers and helping to improve the readability of each paper by providing specific
instructions, one can move the field forward. Perhaps, the advancement is only an epsilon but that is all one can do.

What do you see are the advantages or disadvantages of being proactive? Was your stance different from the past Editors?

Rick Staelin: Oh, I don’t think so. Certainly Hauser was proactive. All editors are proactive in their own ways. So I am not sure that I was doing something very different.

I am not sure there is any advantage per se. I am sure that all persons who take on the role of Editor are self-confident and want to have an impact on the field. I am not sure how else to define impact except through the choices we make as editors. Every editor makes some changes. Hauser did so with his 2-2-2 rule. I made some changes in the review process by discussing every paper with the Area Editors. I really enjoyed that process and found it very helpful.

I think those discussions were helpful since we uncovered other issues and ideas. I think we both learned a lot. For every paper, I raised the issue with the Area Editor: is there anything we could do to make the paper publishable. At times we could not think of anything. Other times we came up with a path or a number of paths which could lead to a publishable paper. My goal has been to help all the papers.

What comments do you have concerning the special issue?

Rick Staelin: For a while I did not want a special issue. Then, as I was leaving the editor’s position, I realized that one way to make an impact was to focus on research which allowed managers to make better decisions—thus, my handling of the special issue on managerial decision making. A lot of the papers published in Marketing Science deal with managerial issues, but they are usually tactical. I wanted something broader and at a higher level focusing on the three C’s. So I discussed this with the Area Editors. Of the 11, eight liked it but three thought it was ridiculous. One thought it would become a buddy system where I would let my friends write papers, and, sometimes, special issues can become like that. That is why I said that all the papers would go through a normal review process. I think the special issue on empirical generalization under John, which came out when I was the editor, will be a highly referenced issue. Not because the papers are all very insightful, but because taken together, they form a very nice collection of stylized facts that will lend themselves to future research questions and models. I think that John and the two special editors Jerry Wind and Frank Bass provided a real service to the community.

I think that broadening the range of topics, like managerial decision-making within organizations, or internet marketing will broaden the readership of the Journal and also broaden the range of researchers who might want to submit articles there—so that Marketing Science becomes their journal of first choice. We are all in competition with other journals, so we should make sure that we get the best work of the researchers in our field, relative to other journals....

By focusing on managerial decision-making, whether behavioral or analytical research, we are expanding the readership and conveying to researchers who work in that area that we should be their first choice. JCR only publishes papers concerned with the consumer and JMR has ignored managerial decision making. So it is an area we can focus on.

Describe a typical day as Editor. What did you enjoy the most in this process?

Rick Staelin: On any day my business manager, Janine Zanek, would inform me of which paper was ready. By that I mean that both reviews have come back. She would then schedule a call with the area editor. The night before the call I would bring the paper home and read the comments and come to my own conclusions. This call with the area editor could last from five minutes to two hours and then I would write my report and so would the AE. The report to the author would then go out within a few days to a week after that.

If you are talking about fun, the conversations with the AE were the most enjoyable. Often they would walk me through their thought process, and I would learn a lot. Sometimes I taught them something too. They would say that they enjoyed the discussion. This was a very unique process, and I am not sure that others would do the same, but I learned a lot and generally some good came out through this process.

I don’t think that I had very many bad experiences with authors or reviewers.

My wife of thirty-five years would say “What the hell you are doing? What are you reading? And why don’t you talk to me?” At times, I had to make those trade-offs. At times, I let things fall through the
cracks and papers were on my desk for two months and I felt bad later for letting that happen. However, there is more to life than just being an editor.

On an average, 20 hours a week was spent on the review process and other related journal business. My own research slowed down a lot. Also, I felt compelled to avoid submitting my work to *Marketing Science*. I have only one of my papers which was published during my editorship, but it started before I took over as the editor and I let John Hauser handle the entire process. But it took me a long time to finish the revision because of my editorial responsibility.

Did you have an idea how much time [being Editor] would take? Did you enjoy all of it?

*Rick Staelin*: I had no idea how much time I would need to give to the job. I thought I would give two days a week to this process. But overall I may have spent more time. For the first two and half years I had a ball, but it started to drag after that. When I was told that Brian was going to take over, suddenly I felt that it was no longer my baby, and it shows in my response time. I have let some papers drag these last few months.

Do you think that three and a half years is long enough time to have an impact?

*Rick Staelin*: It is a fine balance. You want to give the editor enough time to make some changes and also ensure continuity for authors who are submitting, since change of editorship can really hurt authors who are caught in between. At the same time too long a time may cause editor burnout. So, I think that a three to four year term is fine.

With hindsight, what advice would you give yourself now as an Editor?

*Rick Staelin*: Not be egotistical as to think that you can do as much as you think you can do. I read my first editorial and smiled since I did not achieve all of what I set out to do.

Other areas are encroaching on marketing. Today everyone talks about customer orientation. Do you think, as marketers, we are ceding ground to others too easily?

*Rick Staelin*: I agree with you. But if you think about broadening the base of marketing then, as marketers, we have a lot of strength which we can use to influence other areas. For instance, by focusing on issues like "How can firms organize to market themselves better?" or "How can marketing better impact research and development?" marketing is encroaching on other areas also.

Marketing faculty are also publishing in leading disciplinary journals in economics, statistics and psychology. I think we are getting much better in contributing to other areas. So I am more optimistic on that count. We are leaders in some of the statistical models like hierarchical-Bayes model. We will continue to face increasing competition. I don’t think we should be embarrassed about our skills.

Where is the journal going?

*Rick Staelin*: Initially, the journal was intended for quantitative models and also with an emphasis on economics. I have tried to broaden that base in order to broaden readership and impact. I felt the idea of having a one page abstract and a broader range of topics to enhance readership is ultimately for the good of the discipline. Not everyone is happy, but that is what you get when you appoint someone who wants to do something different.

Could you comment on the distribution of papers?

*Rick Staelin*: I am so busy going through the forest and trying to move the review process along that I do not have an idea of these exact details. Though it may sound strange coming from the Editor, I know the flow of things, but you may have a better idea than me on the distribution of different types of papers. I know it sounds funny, but is true. I was looking at a broader sense to get a range of topics but, in terms of day-to-day practicality, that did not factor in.

If you look at its closest competitor, what other journal most resembles the *Marketing Science* portfolio?

*Rick Staelin*: *Management Science*. Both the reviewers are approximately the same, as also the readership. Though *Marketing Science* gets four times as many papers as *Management Science* because of our focus. *JMR* has many fewer analytic papers and
has more standard empirical papers. [By “standard,”] I mean that the technique is standard, so the paper stands on its substantive merits. *Marketing Science* empirical papers tend also to have some methodological content, though it is not always true under my regime. I have tried to encourage papers that are very interesting topic-wise and then the methodology would count less. The behavioral papers accepted, I think, went through the same hurdle as they would go through at *JCR*, and I think that the ones accepted at *Marketing Science* would also get accepted at *JCR*.

If we slipped in quality at all, it was those 3-4 papers where the topic is very interesting and the paper “opened” up a new area of inquiry.

Were there any papers that you think were “home-runs” published during your tenure?

*Rick Staelin:* No, [I am not sure I can answer that] as I am still in the forest. One of the things that disturbed me when I took over was that in recent years, *Marketing Science* had not published many home-runs that changed the field or were cited very widely, papers like Guadagni and Little, and Shugan and Hauser, which changed the field and are also cited widely. That is a rap on the field. I may have published some home runs, but we will not know for a while.

I think we have a lot of very good papers. But any paper which absolutely knocks your socks off, I don’t know. They may be there, but it is too early to tell.

Last questions—the format of the Journal. Do you like the bigger pages?

*Rick Staelin:* You get 15% more print for the same cost.

The one page abstract?

*Rick Staelin:* I would do it again, since it gives a very good feel of what the research is about in a very short time.

The bios at the end?

*Rick Staelin:* They may be wasted journal pages. Those who put some humor make it interesting, but most of us are too straight-laced.

The cartoons on the cover?

*Rick Staelin:* I voted against the picture. It is tradition, so it is tough to vote against it. But it bothered me to be editor of a journal with cartoons on it. I voted against it with some trepidation since it is the tradition.