A Comment on: The Commodification of Marketing Knowledge

In their call for papers for this special issue of the *Journal of Marketing Management*, the guest editors, Douglas Brownlie and Michael Saren, invited comments from journal editors about the poverty of new ideas coming forward in marketing and the positioning of journals. As Editor of the *Journal of Marketing Management* I was pleased to encourage this initiative, as this is a theme which has concerned me for many years now and been the subject of several references in editorials of my own.

In Volume 9.2 of JMM (February 1993) I wrote:

"As a confirmed supporter of the concept of the product life cycle (PLC) it is interesting to speculate on its application to the study of marketing as a business discipline. While the establishment of the first Chair in the subject can be dated to the 1880s, most would agree that marketing only really took off in the mid-1950s to early 1960s with a number of seminal contributions by authors such as Peter Drucker, Joel Dean, Ted Levitt and Eugene McCarthy. Since that time the number of students opting to study the subject at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels has accelerated rapidly and resulted in a significant expansion in the number of academics researching and teaching the subject ... the inevitable consequence will be a further increase in marketing publications.

The question is, however, at what stage will growth begin to slow and the 'market' approach saturation and maturity? The question is prompted not by a concern with the quality of contributions to JMM but a more broadly-based awareness that research and publication in marketing might be approaching a plateau. Two factors prompt this observation. The first is the decline in the incremental value added by current research/publication. The second is the trend towards increasing marketing's domain to the point when it will subsume other fields whose practitioners might legitimately consider to be quite distinct from marketing.

The decline in incremental value added is noticeable..."
everywhere. To a marked degree it is fuelled by the feeling that one should only cite the latest work relating to one’s topic. As a result, earlier path breaking and insightful contributions tend to be overlooked or ignored and much of what passes for original work is a weak replication of seminal contributions published 30 or 40 years ago. The extension of marketing’s domain is apparent in the flurry of publication about internal marketing and relationship marketing. To an old-fashioned marketer like myself much of this writing gives a distinct impression that the authors have just discovered the subject of human resource management, and concepts such as motivation and leadership. While I am all for this, I am not sure that we are not doing marketing a disservice if we seek to take over rather than integrate these concepts. Either way, both phenomena are symptomatic of the ‘hunting’ behaviour observed in biological life cycles when an organism perceives a limit to growth and searches frantically for a means to get round it.”

These thoughts clearly struck a receptive chord with the organizers of the 1994 AMA Winter Educators’ Conference, who set as their theme “Renaissance in Marketing Thought and Practice”. In their call for papers to address this theme they observed:

“The ongoing interplay of marketing theory and practice has led to several new research areas. As a field our agenda now features topics such as relationship marketing, strategic alliances, managing brand equity, total quality management, and market-oriented management, among others.

The emergence of such topics raises at least two provocative issues for marketing scholars. First, are we reinventing the wheel? Even though the general topic headings may be new, how new are the specific research questions related to each area?... Second, interest in many of these emerging topics extends beyond the traditional domain of marketing. Unfortunately, inter-disciplinary collaboration in the conduct of research in marketing is rare.”

Brownlie and Saren (this issue) cite Snowdon (1995) who has expressed the opinion that “a great deal of scholarship is careerist and represents a rational response to the incentive structures in academe where strong pressures exist to publish and differentiate one’s product from others.” It is this trend which has led Brownlie and Saren to adopt the metaphor of commodification as a process which recognizes that “information has become a commodity to be shaped, packaged, distributed and marketed, like any other.”

In some quarters these trends have been termed “marketing’s mid-life crisis”. In a Keynote Address to the 1994 AMA Winter Educators’ Conference, the author
preferred to distinguish this as a case of "research myopia". In drawing an analogy with Ted Levitt's seminal "Marketing Myopia" (1960), it was argued that in the precipitate rush to differentiate one's work from everyone else's, academics were in severe danger of losing sight of key insights and principles in much the same way that the railroad and movie moguls lost sight of the basic need which they existed to serve because of their commitment to, and involvement with, the current and ephemeral means of serving that need. In losing sight of the origins of our subject and the principles upon which it is founded, there seems to be a distinct threat that we will seek to erect a new temple of knowledge without an adequate foundation with which to support the structure. If this is so then surely the whole structure is likely to topple about our ears.

From the evidence reviewed in "Research Myopia" (Baker 1994), it was concluded that most marketing scholars are guilty of research myopia in that they fail to consider earlier research within their own discipline, parallel research activity by scholars in other geographical areas, and complementary research by scholars in other disciplines. In large measure the failure to consider earlier research is attributable to a pre-occupation with recency based upon the mistaken belief that anything more than a few years old is dated and therefore lacking in relevance. It seems inevitable, therefore, that by ignoring the past we will be frequently guilty of re-invention. For example, a major pre-occupation of marketers in recent years has been "time to market". Robert Weigand addressed this very topic in the Journal of Marketing in 1962, but is seldom if ever cited. The importance of parallel processing, concurrent engineering and simultaneity are seen as vital but few researchers appear to be aware of the PERT and CPA techniques first articulated in the late 1950s. Competitiveness is of central concern to us all but how many researchers are aware of, let alone have consulted, Carter and Williams' (1959) analysis of the characteristics of technically progressive firms, and so we could go on.

If the indictments are correct then the relevance of much of what we do must be called into question also. If productivity, on which academic recognition and preferment are judged, is to be measured in terms of frequency and recency rather than quality and importance then the proliferation of trivia can only gather momentum to the neglect of true knowledge.

What is called for is a renaissance in marketing thinking and research. Given the new-found and widespread enthusiasm for relationship marketing in place of the marketing management model which has dominated our thinking for the past 30 years or more, the opportunity for a fundamental re-appraisal of marketing thinking could not be better. Now is the time for all of us to revisit the marketing classics of the 1950s and early 1960s, for it was these that influenced and challenged the senior scholars at the top of the profession today. Now is also the time to re-affirm that marketing, like architecture, engineering and medicine, is a synthetic discipline which draws upon contributions from many other disciplines and integrates these into a body of knowledge which is relevant to a craft or professional practice. Unlike many of the core disciplines such as economics, psychology and sociology, on which it draws, marketing cannot afford to become enmeshed in the scientific rigour that requires one to control or assume away the complexity which is the real world of practice. As with architecture, engineering and medicine, the acid test should be "does it work?". What we need are more basic principles and rules of thumb — what at Harvard Business School in my day were called "currently useful
generalizations" and fewer esoteric irrelevancies which are fit only to grace the pages of the *Journal of Obscurity*.

Before we are overtaken by despair it is as well to remind ourselves that the discipline of marketing is not alone in facing up to this challenge. In an article entitled "Decay of the Dismal Science" in the *Financial Times* (28 March 1995), Robert Chote stated that "Most learned economics journals are now impenetrable to the interested amateur, and to most policy makers too." He went on to say that "The obsession with algebraic elegance has led economists increasingly to interpret real world behaviour in ways that are theoretically defensible but palpably absurd. Some real business cycle theorists argue with straight faces, for example, that unemployment topped 3 million in the UK during the 1980s because the jobless were voluntarily taking more leisure time in the belief that work would be better paid a couple of years later."

Such bizarre conclusions are perhaps not surprising in the light of a 1990s survey of top US graduate students which found that only 3% cited "having a thorough knowledge of the economy as important to their professional success". If marketing scholars are to avoid falling into the same trap, then clearly we should avoid being distracted by the conventions which have led economics as a discipline being usurped everywhere by the ubiquitous business studies courses in which marketing plays such a central role.

"Research Myopia" (Baker 1994), like "Marketing Myopia" (Levitt 1960) which prompted its authorship, was essentially a *cri de coeur* that marketing scholars should recognize that social sciences like marketing differ fundamentally from physical sciences like chemistry and physics. As Luecke (1994, p.4) has argued so cogently "While science and medicine race forward, the people-related disciplines seem to go round in circles." Luecke cites Robert Hayes of the Harvard Business School who wrote an article on *The Timeless Secrets of Industrial Success* in which he observed "Business pundits seem to be forever discovering the truths known to those who lived two generations earlier ..." Luecke comments: "He (Hayes) considered calling this phenomenon Hayes' Law of Circular Progress until an erudite British businessman referred him to an 1834 edition of the *Edinburgh Review* that proposed a similar idea: "In the pure and in the physical sciences, each generation inherits the conquests made by its predecessors ... But in the moral sciences ... particularly the arts of administration: ... the ground never seems to be incontestably won" (p.3). Exactly!

The paradox addressed by Luecke is precisely that which prompted *Research Myopia* and the special edition of this journal: Why is it that marketing scholars keep re-inventing old ideas but fail to use these as a basis for advancing their discipline to provide greater understanding and insight? At least two explanations immediately come to mind.

First, in most academic institutions the high ground is held by the pure (and applied) scientists who can point directly to the benefits to mankind which have flowed directly from their research and scholarship. Following Lord Kelvin's dictum on the importance of measurement, quantification has become a *sine qua non* of the physical sciences. Without questioning its importance in the social sciences too, it is my own opinion that the trivialization of economics referred to earlier is a direct consequence of seeking to ape the physical sciences by developing elegant mathematical solutions to describe undefined social processes. *Caveat marketor*! What
we need to do first is develop an understanding of the processes which govern economic and social behaviour.

Second, as Luecke points out, in business and management "... the school of hard knocks — direct personal experience — continues to function as the de facto finishing school for executives".

Now while it may be true that knowledge is distilled experience and that the most cost-effective and efficient means of acquiring knowledge is through formal education and scholarship, there will always be a premium paid for experience. The oft-repeated assertion "it's all very well in theory but, in practice ..." is but another manifestation of the widely accepted definition of "academic" as "divorced from reality". It is for this reason that most managerial bestsellers are anecdotal and recount personal (and successful) experiences. This is the "real thing".

The dilemma for marketing scholars is that they are uncertain which of these two essentially opposite approaches they should subscribe to. If marketing knowledge is being commodified, then it is because marketers are submitting themselves (along with most other social scientists) to an inappropriate evaluation procedure and the kind of circular reasoning that leads to tautologically correct solutions to unrealistic and often irrelevant problems. On the other hand, if they emphasize a more qualitative approach based on observation and exploratory studies, they may please students and practitioners but lose out in the promotion and recognition stakes in their own organization.

As with most dilemmas an acceptable solution would seem to be a pragmatic compromise. Senior academics, and the editors of scholarly journals, in the field of marketing must convince their peers that they accept the need for evaluation and review but that a different weighting needs to be given to the chosen performance indicators to reflect the very real differences between the physical and social sciences. In promoting this argument they should align themselves with other "synthetic" disciplines and the humanities and not bend the knee to the pure sciences which account for a declining share of higher education. Secondly, and perhaps more important, they should lead by example. In the Report of the AMA Task Force referred to earlier, much of the perceived malaise with the development of marketing scholarship and thought was laid at the doors of the senior members of the academic profession who had abandoned their junior colleagues in pursuit of lucrative consulting assignments and/or the acceptance of promotion procedures inappropriate to the needs of emerging disciplines like marketing. Editors have a particular responsibility here. We must encourage the controversial and new and eschew the bland formulaic contributions which can't be faulted technically but seldom attract any strong feelings either positive or negative. More than anything else we need an open debate about the future development of our discipline. This special edition is a step in the right direction.
References


