Comments on the AMA Task Force Study

Comment by Gilbert A. Churchill, Jr.

THE Task Force charged with investigating the issues of developing, disseminating, and utilizing marketing knowledge is to be complimented. It is obvious from their article that the Task Force has thought long and hard about the process of how marketing knowledge is developed, disseminated, and utilized. They have written a provocative article, one of the best I have seen on what is currently wrong in the marketing discipline with respect to these issues and what should be done to reduce the impediments. Though I do not agree with everything the article suggests, I do agree with much of it—which presented a dilemma in attempting to prepare a comment. I felt I could do one of three things. I could say “good point,” “excellent suggestion,” or offer some other kudos on the parts I especially liked, then follow up with additional ideas or suggestions. A second strategy would be to go through the manuscript systematically, commenting on all the points with which I disagreed or had something to add. Still a third strategy would be to restrict my comments to a subset of issues brought up in the article.

After much deliberation, I decided on the third strategy, partially because I felt it better to discuss a few issues in depth rather than many issues superficially. In particular, I decided to concentrate on the knowledge dissemination process and more specifically on the manuscript review part of that process for several reasons. First, the Task Force identifies several weaknesses in the dissemination process, but I do not think they go far enough in identifying weaknesses in the manuscript review process or in proposing solutions. Second, though it may not be the most important issue they raise (greater resources directed to marketing, new mechanisms for knowledge development, and the supply/demand faculty imbalance all have potentially more important long-term implications), the manuscript review process is a critical link in knowledge development and dissemination. Further, it is an actionable link that can be changed more readily than some of the others. It is also one on which I believe I can offer a unique perspective, having served as editor of the Journal of Marketing Research for four years. Finally, it is one aspect of the process that I find increasingly troublesome.

The purposes of my comments, then, are to discuss what I perceive to be some of the most dysfunc-
tional aspects of the current manuscript review process and to offer some suggestions about the selection of editorial board members and the process used to review manuscripts.

**Review Board Structure**

My first observation is that we are overworking some of the discipline’s most productive scholars with reviewing activity. As a former editor, I well appreciate the critically important role of reviewers. Though the quality of the articles submitted affects the quality of the journals more than anything else, editorial board members perform a pivotal task. Getting reviewers who can provide critical, constructive, and timely reviews is a challenging problem for editors. Finding reviewers who excel on all of these dimensions is difficult. For example, many reviewers provide prompt reviews, but ones that are not particularly insightful. Other reviewers provide critical reviews, yet are not always constructive. Rare is the reviewer who can pick out the unique contribution of a manuscript and who can offer suggestions for altering the manuscript to enhance the worthwhile elements even though it has flaws.

When editors find people who can provide timely, critical, and constructive reviews, they tend to hold onto them tenaciously. Such reviewers become very dear to editors’ hearts. I understand and sympathize with this tendency, but I think it has some unfortunate consequences for the marketing discipline. As various editors discover these “star reviewers,” they use them on an ad hoc basis or formally appoint them to their editorial boards, with the result that these scholars become increasingly burdened with reviewing articles. Also, reviewing activity becomes concentrated among too few people. Consider, for example, the *Journal of Marketing Research (JMR)*, *Journal of Marketing (JM)*, and *Journal of Consumer Research (JCR)*, which are three of the most prestigious journals serving the marketing discipline. A check of the first issue of each journal published in 1988 indicates that a total of 149 people serve on the three editorial boards. Though this group is only a small proportion of the total community of marketing scholars, four of these people serve on all three editorial boards and several others serve on two of them. For example, less than 60% of the JMR editorial board members review only for that journal; almost one-third of them also belong to the JM editorial board and another 10% serve on the editorial board of JCR. There is also approximately a 10% overlap of the JM and JCR boards.

Reviewing for these journals is not the total extent of reviewing activity for these 149 people, either. Many of them are called upon to review for other journals, for various track competitions for AMA, ACR, ORSA-TIMS conferences, and dissertation competitions. Consequently, it is not unusual for several of these individuals to review 30 to 50 papers a year. On the conservative assumption that a manuscript review only takes one-half day, some of the discipline’s most insightful scholars spend one month each year reviewing other people’s work. Time spent reviewing is time away from their own scholarship. Uninterrupted time to work on one’s own projects is often a critical factor in successfully completing them. Respecting journal reviewing deadlines often means interrupting one’s own research, with the consequence that its completion is delayed. Thus, one of my concerns is that we may be shortchanging the discipline by asking people to serve on multiple editorial boards and by not distributing reviewing activity among more scholars.

There is no question that some reviewing can improve a reviewer’s own scholarship. The process of searching for weaknesses in the manuscripts of others can sensitize reviewers to problems to avoid in their own research. Also, reviewing may keep an individual in touch with the latest developments in the field. However, there is a point of diminishing with increased reviewing activity. At that point, the contribution tilts in the direction of service to the discipline and away from improving a reviewer’s own research.

A key issue, then, is whether star reviewers would serve a more vital role by contributing to knowledge through their own work or by reviewing the contributions of others. I personally believe that their more useful function given the current state of affairs is contributing to knowledge through their own research, particularly in light of the Task Force’s report that 80 to 85% of the submitted manuscripts are rejected and their conclusion that “The effort expended on such papers adds no incremental knowledge in the published literature and, presumably, does not add significantly to the knowledge of the reviewers themselves” (p. 5). Spreading reviewing activity among more scholars rather than concentrating it among so few would enable more people to gain the benefits of some reviewing activity without impairing the manuscript review process.

Another potential dysfunctional consequence of an individual’s appointment to more than one editorial board is the possible discouragement of new ideas within the discipline. Reviewers, along with editors, tend to serve as gatekeepers for the discipline. They judge what is worthy to be published and consequently what is worth being consumed by the marketing community at large. Though some reviewers are very eclectic and tolerant of divergent viewpoints, others maintain a particular philosophical posture. The posture may involve firm notions about the most appropriate conceptual foundation for the ideas in a paper, the appropriate analytical tools for investigating
the problem, and so on. By asking people to serve on multiple editorial boards, we may be restricting the range of perspectives, issues, and approaches we allow in our journals, thereby promoting the very agenda of “knowledge creep” rather than “knowledge spur” that is of concern to the Task Force (p. 6).

Another issue pertaining to the structure of our editorial boards is how long people should serve. To be appointed to the review board of one of the discipline’s leading journals is a feather in one’s cap and a recognition of one’s accomplishments. An individual most probably gains this recognition by challenging the status quo or by offering a new theoretical perspective or a new way of looking at an old issue. He or she has successfully convinced at least a subset of the community of scholars that his or her perspective provides some special insight.

Once committed to a perspective, though, particularly one that has enhanced the individual’s status in the discipline, that person may have a natural tendency to hold onto that perspective and defend it against attack. The “attacks” are often in the form of new perspectives, often proposed by more junior scholars. Reviewers may erect hurdles and barriers similar to the ones they themselves had to surmount in getting their ideas accepted. Such obstacles are not all bad, as they cause the new perspectives to be explored more fully and carefully, but in the long term they can stifle originality of thought. Instead of embarking on more promising, but perhaps riskier undertakings, authors may choose to focus on fine points or relatively minor issues in the “accepted” theoretical paradigms because they then do not need to convince reviewers that such paradigms are worth investigating.

Theoretically, an editorial board changes every time a new editor is appointed because editors typically are given the prerogative of appointing the reviewers. Practically, though, the former and current editors confer during the transition. They discuss which reviewers are particularly good and which ones are not. Perhaps intimidated by the task, new editors tend to develop an immediate cadre of extremely qualified, experienced reviewers by reappointing most of the ones who are highly recommended. Because they believe they owe this professional service to the discipline, because of the prestige of editorial board assignments, or because they receive intrinsic satisfaction from the reviewing activity, many experienced reviewers accept reappointment. When editor after editor appoints the same individual or set of individuals, however, the range of perspectives allowed to be expressed in the journals may narrow.

Serving as a reviewer for successive editors is relatively common in the marketing discipline. Figure 1, for example, depicts the distribution of years of continuous service for persons currently on the editorial
boards of the three major AMA-sponsored journals. When one considers that the JMR and JM editors are appointed for three-year terms, the distributions indicate that more than 40% of the JMR and almost two-thirds of the JM editorial board members have served for at least three editors (i.e., seven years or more). The editorship of JCR does not change as regularly and it is difficult to translate years of service into number of editors served. The data indicate, though, that more than 50% of the current JCR reviewers have served seven years or more. Not shown is the fact that 12% of these reviewers have served continuously on the editorial board since JCR was founded. Not only does serving so long have the potential to restrict discourse, but it may also reduce the energies of these reviewers toward their own scholarship.

I have two recommendations for the structure of the editorial boards of marketing journals. First, I suggest the American Marketing Association establish a policy that an individual can serve on the editorial board of only one of the journals it sponsors at a time. Second, I suggest the AMA also pass a policy restricting every reviewer to at most two consecutive three-year terms on a particular editorial board. Two consecutive appointments would enable each incoming editor to have some stability in board judgment, but would afford a greater potential for introducing fresh perspectives in a number of areas.

These policies would reduce the current reviewing burden the discipline places on some of its most insightful scholars. They would enable these people to spend more time on their own scholarship, which should bode well for knowledge development in the discipline. They also would enable more people to receive the benefits of doing some reviewing activity. Finally, they would assuage the guilt reviewers now experience when they decline an editorial board appointment. If the decision were automatic, reviewers would no longer feel they are being irresponsible citizens for not continuing.

The Review Process

Not only would restructuring of the AMA's editorial boards improve knowledge development and dissemination, but so would some changes in the process by which articles are reviewed and accepted/rejected. I was struck by a comment made by the Task Force in discussing the problems in the communication of ideas and findings: “First, the current review and decision system used by the leading research journals in marketing is likely to be creating barriers to the long-term development of marketing knowledge. Prominent among the concerns here is the nature of the feedback provided by reviewers, including both the bases on which evaluation is done and the appearance of an adversarial system in many instances” (p. 4).

The review system does seem to be adversarial. Perhaps that is its very nature. The general feeling among reviewers that I have talked to is that the role of a reviewer is primarily to find flaws in a manuscript and point out those flaws to an editor. As editor, I appreciated knowing the weaknesses in a particular paper. (I appreciated even more the pointing out of unique contributions or insights provided by a paper. Unfortunately, such efforts were much less common in spite of my pleas.)

I wonder, however, whether the review process has not become more adversarial in recent years. Several developments prompt me to raise this issue. One change that I have observed is the increased number of reviewers to whom a paper is assigned. It seems to me that in the past a paper was assigned to two reviewers, and a third or fourth reviewer was called in on an "as-needed" basis. Most typically, the additional reviewers were used when the first two were diametrically opposed as to what to do with the manuscript and the editor had no special expertise in the area. Generally, editors could make decisions with two reviews.

It is not unusual now for three reviewers to be assigned routinely to every manuscript and for four reviewers to be assigned to some. The cost of this system seems to me to be completely disproportionate to the benefits. The major benefits accrue to the editor in terms of managing the system. The editor's decision is typically more clearcut because there is a majority favoring acceptance or rejection. The editor can make a decision for rejection/revision/acceptance on the basis of the original set of reviews without calling in a referee, which speeds up the process. The quicker turnaround of the manuscript also is welcomed by anxious authors—but at what cost?

Consider the following facts. Many times reviewers agree that a particular manuscript should be rejected. They almost never agree that a manuscript should be accepted "as is." Between these extremes, the response is typically mixed. Sometimes the reviewers agree that the manuscript warrants revision, but disagree about the specific revisions needed. Just as often they disagree in their basic recommendations, with one reviewer suggesting some potential with revision and the other recommending the manuscript go no further in the review process. The simple point is that unanimity on the positive side is rare among reviewers. Most reviewers can find flaws in any manuscript, probably rightly, and the only real issue is how damning the flaws are. To me it seems that as more reviewers become involved in evaluating a particular manuscript, the more difficult it becomes to find manuscripts that satisfy all reviewers' standards for
publication. A consequence is that the system sometimes bogs down in endless revisions and the preparation of increasingly detailed sets of notes for the reviewers that outline how the authors responded to each of the many comments. The number of iterations and the length of the replies seem to be in direct proportion to the number of reviewers assigned the manuscript in the first place. The process generates a great amount of paper, with the author’s notes for the reviewers sometimes being as long as the manuscript itself.

Further, the reviewers’ recommendations often are in conflict. For example, one may suggest the paper be shortened so that its length is more in line with its contribution, whereas another suggests more detail be provided about theoretical underpinnings, the method of analysis, results, or implications. Authors end up on the horns of a dilemma in trying to satisfy such reviewers and the revisions become painstaking compromises balancing the opposing viewpoints. The frequency with which the reviews fundamentally conflict seems to be in direct proportion to the number of reviewers initially assigned the manuscript. After two to three revisions to address conflicting reviewers’ recommendations, some papers bear little resemblance to the original submission. It becomes difficult to sort the author’s ideas from the reviewers’ suggestions.

Increasingly, I ask myself whether there is not a better way to improve manuscript reviewing while (1) not compromising the standards of the journals, (2) ensuring that authors are sensitized to the weaknesses in their manuscripts, and (3) reducing frustration with the process and the likelihood of early author burnout. One Task Force idea I particularly like is their proposal for more commentaries. I therefore submit the following modified review process, with an emphasis on reducing the number of iterations, for editors to consider.

1. Assign two editorial board members to review the initially submitted manuscript and use referees only on those manuscripts for which the editor clearly needs a third opinion.

2. Attempt to make an early decision on whether the manuscript has promise with revision or should be rejected outright. To do so is not always possible because the original version may omit some important details or may obscure the contribution, but try to make such judgments whenever possible.

3. Widen the tightrope authors are required to walk when revising. Instead of insisting that they satisfy the reviewers’ conflicting comments as best they can and that they prepare 10 to 20 pages of reactions in addition to revising the manuscript, allow them more discretion in the revision. Also advise that if it seems appropriate (e.g., the manuscript is potentially very important and though the authors and reviewers disagree, both have something important to offer the field), one or more of the reviewers will be invited to prepare a comment to be published with the article.

A process modified along these lines would have several benefits. First, it would generate some important savings in reviewers’ energies because more than 50% of the articles submitted to our major journals are rejected after only one review, with the reviewers unanimously recommending rejection. On more than 50% of the approximately 1000 papers submitted to the AMA’s major journals, one review would thus be saved. That alone is 250 days of volunteer review time and this saving is in only a very small subset of the journals serving the marketing discipline. Part of the time saved would be channeled into reviews of articles for which a third opinion is needed because the initial two reviews give mixed signals for editors. A significant amount of the time saved would be available for other activities.

A second and more important benefit is that the process would not compromise the quality standards of the journals. Authors would still need to consider reviewer comments that indicate weaknesses in the article. The possibility that a commentary would be published with the article would probably force authors to pay even more attention to weaknesses in their papers than they do in the current system. Such a system also should produce less author frustration with the process.

A third benefit is that the manuscripts finally published should reflect more of the authors’ thinking rather than a compromise to satisfy reviewers. As the Task Force suggests, the publication of the commentaries should make for more interesting reading. When one reads an article now, one has little opportunity to develop an appreciation for the controversial issues involved or the tradeoffs that were made because they are masked in the revisions made to satisfy the reviewers. As now described, most studies appear to have proceeded from point a to point b without digression—which of course is not the way they did proceed but only the appearance of how they proceeded because of the way they are written. The inherent tradeoffs should become more obvious with the commentaries.

Another benefit of the commentaries is that the review process would become more constructive and less adversarial. Both the authors and the reviewers could express their opinions more forcefully without the seemingly endless process of negotiation and com-
promise inherent in the current system. Reviewers would have additional incentive to prepare carefully thought out, carefully argued, constructive reviews. Such reviews are more likely to be published, thereby enhancing the reviewers' own records of productivity while exposing their helpful perspectives and viewpoints to the discipline as a whole rather than only to the authors who wrote the manuscript they were charged with reviewing.

Commentaries should be considered for many articles, but they seem to be particularly valuable for review articles. Both conceptual and empirical review articles are among the most useful and influential articles published in the marketing journals. One need only look at the types of articles winning outstanding article awards in the various journals to find support for this statement. However, the marketing journals are woefully lacking in the number of such articles. Persons who have worked in an area for a while are most qualified to prepare them, but they are often reluctant to do so. Part of that reluctance can be traced to the riskiness of the activity. In preparing such a review, one may step on the toes of one or more people because a favorite viewpoint is slighted. Scholars working in the area naturally serve as reviewers for such an article. If their favorite perspective is not completely supported, some reviewers may be inclined to criticize and reject it more forcefully. The human tendency to protect the "turf" we have staked out produces the sorry situation that few review articles end up being published in the marketing journals in spite of their contribution to the field. The fact that few are published discourages other authors from even preparing them. Encouraging qualified scholars to prepare review articles while allowing reviewers to prepare commentaries would diminish, if not alleviate, the inherent difficulties in satisfying all interested parties.

The commentary approach also should help generate an emphasis on more important, but higher risk, research efforts. It seems currently that most articles have a short-term orientation, partially because of the process. Simply put, given the current review process, incremental investigations that attempt to fine-tune established theories or methods are less risky than embarking on something completely new. When working within accepted paradigms, authors do not need to convince reviewers that the views espoused in their manuscripts are the "correct way" to view the phenomenon. Rather, authors primarily need to design quality studies that are valid with respect to some aspect of the paradigm. Consequently, we often seem to apply increasingly greater methodological sophistication to increasingly less important problems (e.g., less important issues in accepted paradigms). Designing a "tight study" to investigate some relatively minor variation in an accepted conceptual framework is usually easier and less risky than designing a study that cannot be methodologically as tight, but which addresses a more important issue.

Summary

This comment elaborates several reactions triggered by the Task Force's study of the impediments to the development, dissemination, and utilization of marketing knowledge. Focusing on the review part of the dissemination process, I suggest several approaches the marketing discipline might consider to make the review process less adversarial while increasing the new knowledge content of its journals. More specifically, I propose that the AMA establish policies that an individual can serve on the editorial board of only one AMA-sponsored journal at a time and that reviewers be restricted to at most two consecutive terms on a particular editorial board. I also argue for revisions in the review process, particularly the greater use of commentaries appearing concurrently with accepted articles.

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