George S. Day

Using the Past as a Guide to the Future: Reflections on the History of the *Journal of Marketing*

Histories serve many functions. They reveal our origins, celebrate our successes, and remind us of our debts to our intellectual ancestors. A history also helps interpret the past by identifying the reasons for important transitions. Roger Kerin’s (1996) thoughtful and finely-crafted retrospective on the milestones in the history of the *Journal of Marketing* serves all these functions admirably. He makes a valuable contribution by putting into perspective the events and trends that have shaped this journal.

Kerin’s chronicle also provides some clues about the future. If we project where the present momentum is carrying this journal—and assume there will be no intervention to change this direction—then some troubling questions arise concerning the future role and influence of the *Journal of Marketing*. The ancient Chinese saying, “Unless we change our direction, we are likely to wind up where we are headed,” defines the challenge. Specifically, we need to be concerned about the signs of a gradual erosion of the *Journal of Marketing*’s traditional role as a thought-leader within the academic discipline of marketing.

However, momentum is neither irreversible nor irresistible, and there are many other forces that shape the future of this journal. The most influential forces are the pace and progress of marketing theory, developments in allied disciplines, initiatives by other journals in the field, and changing roles of the marketing function in the organizations of the future. My purpose with this commentary is to use Kerin’s editorial and literary history to make conjectures about the future and suggest how the *Journal of Marketing* might retain its leadership within the field.

Interpreting the Past

Is the evolution of the *Journal of Marketing* a story of shifting emphasis to keep abreast of both events and the advancement of knowledge or one of diminished influence in a field that has become more fragmented and diffused? Both interpretations have merit. A case could be made that the recurring changes in emphasis across the six decades reflect the marketing issues of the time, the shifting definition of the nature and domain of marketing, the varied backgrounds and interests of successive editors, or the successive refinements in theory development and testing.

A competing interpretation of the journal’s past points to a progressive shrinking of the domain of the *Journal of Marketing* as more specialized journals were periodically launched. In Kerin’s chronicle, there is a recurring pattern in which a new journal emerges to address the defining theme of the previous decade of the *Journal of Marketing*. Every field of intellectual inquiry is experiencing a similar explosion in its population of journals in response to the growth and specialization of the knowledge base and the mounting supply of manuscripts.

As the *Journal of Marketing*’s territory has become progressively circumscribed by journals with more distinctive positioning and homogeneous constituencies, there has been a commensurate dilution of its influence in the field. This is the familiar plight of a generalist in a sea of specialists. One possible rebuttal to this gloomy interpretation is that the *Journal of Marketing* has confronted this problem every decade, and each time has been energized by a new theme. What is the prognosis for the next decade?

The defining theme of the past decade has been appropriately labeled, “Marketing as an Integrative Science.” During this period, the *Journal of Marketing* was hospitable to elaborate conceptual frameworks that synthesized “interdisciplinary knowledge pertaining to a particular domain of marketing phenomena” (Kerin 1996, p. 7). The ensuing frameworks were influential in spawning extensions and empirical tests, and at their best, provided fresh and powerful insights into marketing phenomena. Some caution is warranted, for these frameworks borrow heavily from other disciplines. As the domain of our conceptual frameworks expands outward, the editorial scope of the *Journal of Marketing* increasingly overlaps with other academic disciplines.

Regrettably, the ensuing balance of trade is lopsided, for the marketing discipline has been a heavy net borrower in the exchange of concepts and theories. Ironically, this often happens because other fields of inquiry preempt marketing frameworks, concepts, and methods and exploit them more fully. The best example is industrial organization economics, which has employed such marketing concepts as segmentation and positioning, life cycle analysis, and inno-
tion and diffusion processes, and put them in a better package for general management use.

Why the preemptive moves were more successful is debatable. Hunt (1994) notes the propensity of marketing scholars to rely on concepts, frameworks, and theories from other "more basic" disciplines because of a narrow construction of marketing as an applied discipline.

The overall picture that results is a journal with circumscribed influence addressing a broader, but more ambiguous, domain. This is where the momentum seems to be carying the Journal of Marketing. When Kerin prepares his sequel in 2005 is that what he will say about the next decade? Fortunately, this momentum is not preordained, so it is appropriate to ask where the Journal of Marketing could and should exercise leadership. There is an abundance of possible topics to address. But even here there is cause for concern, because a look ahead reveals a future in which marketing as functional area and academic discipline will have diminished influence.

**Challenges to Marketing**

Marketing as a function and discipline has its greatest influence when there is a tight meshing of the competencies of marketers with emerging issues in theory and practice (Day 1992). As the fit loosens, or other disciplines and management functions have competencies more attuned to these emerging issues, marketing loses ground.

Some signals suggest that the coming decade will be supportive for both marketing and marketers. A brief and impressionist overview serves to make the overall point. Each of these topics could be a possible theme for the *Journal of Marketing* to address in a directed fashion, which would coalesce and motivate marketing thought.

- Market structure and industry boundaries are increasingly indeterminate. In emerging technology-based industries, functionalities and customer benefits are converging. Consider digital electronics: Information providers, hardware and software suppliers, electronics firms, and channel members are all vying for the same space.
- After a decade of restructuring and reengineering, with an emphasis on cutting assets and personnel, the new priority is renewal and growth through innovation.
- Organizations are increasingly participating in webs of alliances to realize economies of scale, accelerate market entry, or enhance their capabilities. Competition is often between networks of alliances.
- Customer retention and relationship building have become higher priorities than acquiring new customers. Meanwhile, interactive, collaborative on-line systems permit one-to-one marketing.

There are many other important topics in the foreseeable future in which the marketing discipline could and should make a contribution, but a past history of relative neglect dampens prospects for future influence. Despite an early start, this field has not effectively addressed the challenge of the globalization of markets and operations. Studies of cross-cultural differences in buyer behavior or the effect of country of origin do not suffice when the big issues needing answers are about global competitive interactions, global new product development and launch practices, sharing of market insights across borders, or the coordination and integration of multientry operations.

In view of the rich array of opportunities, why is it possible that marketing might continue to lose influence in academia and practice? Part of the reason lies in the paradox between the wide-spread acceptance of marketing as an organizational orientation and the confused status of marketing as a functional activity. The trend is toward narrowing responsibility or even abandoning the traditional department. Various commentators have asserted that the marketing function is struggling "in the midst of a mid-life crisis[,] ... failing to live up to its pretensions[, and] ... rarely leading the drive to improve performance," and marketing departments are "struggling with diminished stature and thinning ranks." All this is happening as the concept of organizations evolves from functional groups within hierarchical structures to collections of linked processes. The net effect of this evolution diminishes the role of all functions. Meanwhile organizational boundaries are redrawn to be simultaneously tight, by focusing on a few core processes, and porous, by outsourcing noncore activities.

These events and trends within practice are slowly being mirrored in academia and in the role of marketing departments in business schools. Marketing course enrollments are dropping in many schools as student interests shift in response to perceived career opportunities and other disciplines prove more responsive to the evolving management priorities. The traditional domains of marketing courses are being shared increasingly with courses on service management, operations management, competitive strategy, and information technology. Such sharing is entirely natural, because complex issues are best studied with multidisciplinary approaches and frameworks and best handled by cross-functional teams. But, we are still left with the question of where and how marketing will contribute to the future by leveraging its competencies.

**Retaining Leadership**

As knowledge expands and becomes more specialized, more journals share the *Journal of Marketing*‘s domain, and as marketing practice continues its transformation, the future promises to be more challenging. Each of these trends threatens to undermine the traditional role of the *Journal of Marketing* as a thought-leader within the academic discipline of marketing.

The *Journal of Marketing*‘s response to these concerns has been to (1) follow the present policy of responding to the flow of manuscripts as they are submitted and (2) exercise influence through the editorial selection process. This reactive approach has served this journal in the past and enabled continued adjustments in emphasis during the past 60 years. It will not suffice if the domain becomes further circumscribed and the positioning more ambiguous relative to other

---

1These quotations were drawn from a series of studies on the future of the marketing function by McKinsey & Company, Cooper's & Lybrand, and the Boston Consulting Group, among others.
marketing journals with clearly defined constituencies and ambitious aspirations.

How does a broad-scope journal such as the *Journal of Marketing* assert leadership? For some answers, we can look to journals in allied fields that have recently exercised a strong steering effect on their disciplines. Both the *Strategic Management Journal* and *Organization Science* have become influential, partly because of the judicious choices of themes and topics for their special issues and the stature of the guest editors responsible for these issues. Three examples are instructive: First, a recent issue of *Organization Science* was entirely devoted to “Electronic Communication and Changing Organization Forms.” Second, the *Strategic Management Journal* has been calling for papers on “Evolutionary Perspectives on Strategy” for the ninth annual special issue. Third, the *Journal of Marketing Research* had an enthusiastic response to a call for papers for a special issue on “Innovation in New Product Development: Best Practices for Research, Modeling, and Applications.” Each of these special issues is a catalyst that energizes and focuses streams of research that are underway and a resource for later reference.

Most *Journal of Marketing* editors have been unwilling or unable to undertake special issues for a variety of reasons: budget constraints, concerns about erosion of quality standards, and the likelihood that a special issue would span the tenure of two editors. These are valid concerns, but the success of other journals with the special issue format suggests they can be surmounted. The main elements of a workable policy for developing high quality, influential special issues are:

1. The creation of an Advisory Board to identify themes and select topics and editors for prospective special issues—The Marketing Science Institute Research Priorities, published every two years, would be a valuable source of guidance.
2. The active and public solicitation of proposals for special issues, with choices among competing topics on the basis of feasibility, centrality, and their fit with priority themes.
3. The use of standard double-blind manuscript reviewing procedures, and rigorous criteria for judging the quality of submissions.
4. The judicious use of invited commentaries and thoughtful introduction to the issue by the guest editors.
5. The arrangement of a conference on the topic of the special issue to which the authors of accepted papers be invited to improve the papers and identify linkages among them.

It may also be time for the *Journal of Marketing* to revisit the policy on section editors. When the editor’s time is fully absorbed by the relentless flow of manuscripts, there is little left for planning new initiatives or overseeing special issues. The role of section editors is to share some of the load, provide expertise within a specific domain, and serve on an advisory board for special issues.

**Summary**

The *Journal of Marketing* has both a responsibility to reassert its leadership and the ability and resources to accept this responsibility. This journal has a rich and distinguished history, a strong brand name, a hard-earned readership base, and a deep roster of editorial talent and leadership. Each decade has seen a successful adaptation to the challenges of the period. By 2005, we should be able to look back and say the same thing about the coming decade.

**REFERENCES**

