A Comment on: The Commodification of Marketing Knowledge

This special issue is based on the assumption that knowledge about marketing has become commodified, in an era when concern is being expressed about the development, dissemination and utilization of marketing knowledge. As Editor of the Journal of Strategic Marketing, I have been invited to comment on the paper by Brownlie and Saren (this issue) and on Michael Baker’s commentary (this issue) as the Editor of the Journal of Marketing Management, although I focus on the latter.

It seems to me that the underlying issue is developing our understanding of the domain of organizational behaviour and practice that is currently labelled marketing, with the aim of interpreting, explaining and codifying a particular set of complex human phenomena. As with the development of any body of knowledge, certain rules and conventions must be followed if acquired information is to be accepted as bona fide knowledge by those working both within and outside the domain. The underlying principle of the main set of rules and conventions is the incremental testing and refinement of propositions and/or hypotheses about certain phenomena, through the collection of information pertinent to measurement constructs within the context in which they reside. With this incremental testing the collected information is interpreted and explained, conclusions are drawn about the nature of the phenomena and theories are built, until eventually the refined information and conclusions are accepted as knowledge that adequately explains the phenomena, at a particular point in time².

A violation of this approach is drawing conclusions about the nature of phenomena based on little or no information and theory, and purporting that the conclusions represent reality. It seems to me that the Editor of the Journal of Marketing Management violates this rule in his commentary on the development, dissemination and utilization of marketing knowledge. My commentary challenges some of Michael Baker’s conclusions, but is presented in the spirit of, using the words of Michael Baker, “more than anything else we need an open debate about the future development of our discipline”.

The conclusions of Michael Baker that I challenge are listed and discussed as follows:

“The there is a decline in the incremental value added by current research and publications.”

No evidence is given to support this conclusion. Has a survey been done of journals over the last, say, 5 years, that classified articles into different marketing topics, that

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² As well as a literature on scientific methodology, there are many articles in the business administration literature on developing knowledge (such as Churchill 1979; Deshpande 1983; Harrigan 1983; Arndt 1985; Shrivastava 1987; Whetten 1989; Gioia and Pitre 1990; Bartunek et al. 1993; Peffer 1993).
measured the value that each subsequent article added in each relevant topic, and which provided valid and reliable information as a result of these measurements? If there is no information to support this conclusion about a decline in the incremental value added, then it is difficult to accept as a representation of reality about the development of marketing knowledge.

"There is a 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."

Again no evidence is given to support this conclusion. Has a study been done of current knowledge that has defined the domains of "other fields" and the domain of marketing, that has accurately measured overlap, and in which the results of such measurement provide information that illustrate the phenomenon of subsumption? Even if such a conclusion can be accepted as a representation of reality, why is it detrimental to developing knowledge, as Baker suggests? Indeed, Pfeffer (1993) and Webster (1992), for example, argue that for the development of knowledge in the organizational sciences, such subsumption is necessary as currently domains or paradigms of organizational disciplines have not been universally agreed. Also, why should practitioners be in the better position to judge the legitimacy of domains? Have they been surveyed to find out if there is common agreement on domain discrimination, and if indeed this is the dominant view? Again, it is difficult to accept this conclusion as a representation of reality about the development of marketing knowledge.

"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."

Again evidence is not given for this conclusion, which is discussed at length by Baker. If we are to accept the first part of this statement, again there should be information from the measurement of the incremental added value of research to knowledge to demonstrate a decline not only from journals but from "everywhere" (sic). Also, no evidence is given of a study that investigated whether or not the majority of authors do indeed cite only the latest work. Therefore, again it is difficult to accept this conclusion as a representation of reality.

However, this particular point raises a fundamental issue about the development of knowledge. The latter is achieved in an incremental fashion with each subsequent study building on previous studies, in which new information is a refinement of previous information, and in which previous legitimate information is subsumed into new conclusions and theories as the understanding of relationships is improved and as the developing theories come closer to being accepted as representations of reality. Therefore, there is no need to go back to "earlier path breaking studies" as Baker claims, as they should already be subsumed; indeed it is likely to be dangerous to do so as earlier studies have obviously not accommodated later research results and therefore will now be inadequate, while they are likely to have been completed in a contextual situation that is no longer relevant to current theory development.
“Now is the time to reaffirm that marketing, like architecture, engineering and medicine, is a synthetic discipline which draws upon contributions from many other disciplines.”

Within the context of this conclusion, Baker argues for a renaissance in marketing thinking and research which should incorporate other disciplines. To accept this conclusion we must assume that there is information from a study which demonstrates that, within the literature, such synthesis is not taking place to an appreciable extent. However, such evidence is not reported. Without this evidence it could be equally argued that it has been underway for several years. Conversely, an earlier conclusion of Baker’s was that the domain of marketing has already spread too far into other disciplines. These two conclusions seem to be contradictory.

“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.”

Once again, has there been a study of recent research projects that provides evidence that the majority of studies do not incorporate control variables when measuring the phenomena being studied, and/or that they “assume away” environmental complexity in their measurement? If there is no information then we cannot conclude that this has been detrimental to marketing knowledge development.

However, it seems to me that if marketing is to develop into an acceptable body of knowledge then the opposite needs to happen. That is, marketing does need to get enmeshed in scientific rigour so that when relationships between particular variables are investigated, in order to achieve understanding of phenomena, the effects of intervening variables among the relationships are incorporated into theory building, otherwise the underlying relationships being investigated will not be properly understood. Consequently it is not an issue of “assuming away” intervening variables, but one of their incorporation.

“Why is it that marketing scholars keep reinventing old ideas but fail to use these as a basis for advancing their discipline.”

Finally, I can only repeat my previous query, where is the evidence to support this conclusion about the development of marketing knowledge? Where is the information that identifies just what “old ideas” are, that demonstrates how they are reinvented in the recent literature, and that consequently shows that understanding is not advanced? Once again it is difficult to accept this conclusion as a representation of the reality of the development of marketing knowledge. Again the point is that existing knowledge (which may be what Baker refers to as “old ideas”) needs to be refined through the enriching of earlier theories. Therefore, each subsequent study needs a starting point of knowledge, but this does not mean that starting knowledge is being “reinvented”.
Future Development of Knowledge

It seems to me that a major debate should be about the set of rules and conventions that are acceptable for collecting information and for converting it into marketing knowledge that will be accepted as representing reality. My opinion is that unless we can agree on how to generate valid and reliable information, both in the logical and statistical sense, and on how to convert this information into meaningful knowledge, then we will be unable to achieve major advances in understanding.

This view clearly begs the question, what is the “right” set of rules and conventions? It seems to me that the basis of enquiry must be the rigour, discipline and systematization of scientific research methodology. Indeed, the foregoing arguments about Michael Baker’s conclusions also demonstrate why such a basis is necessary in order to make incremental advances in our knowledge of marketing. However, this does not exclude other sets of rules and conventions. For example, Hunt (1994) suggests encompassing scientific realism with critical pluralism. The latter adds a tolerant and open posture towards new theories and methods for refining and advancing knowledge, with a necessity to subject all theories and methodologies to critical scrutiny. Indeed, the above commentary on Michael Baker’s conclusions also demonstrates the application of critical pluralism. However, other sets of rules and conventions are discussed in the philosophy of science literature, which could also be debated further with respect to developing marketing knowledge.

In this context, how can journals contribute to the development of marketing knowledge? A conclusion of the AMA Task Force was that Editors and Editorial Boards are often “gatekeepers” of existing theories and methodologies. This creates a barrier to publish for many researchers, and implies little benefit from critical pluralism. The latter can be used to encourage the testing of refined and/or new hypotheses and/or propositions about particular phenomena, and new but justifiable methods of investigation. However, new approaches can also, of course, be subject to critical scrutiny with respect to rigour and discipline, particularly with respect to drawing conclusions, especially when they are not justified by adequate evidence. This does not mean that we should encourage the controversial and new per se, as Michael Baker suggests. The controversial and new must be within the rules and conventions; if they do not build-on existing knowledge in a justifiable manner then they are outside the doctrine of criticality. Also, in my opinion we must not, as Michael Baker suggests, “eschew the bland formulaic contributions that cannot be faulted technically but seldom attract strong feelings either positive or negative”. If such contributions have accommodated rules and conventions of scientific realism and critical pluralism, then it is likely that there are additions to understanding within the realms of incremental knowledge development, even if they do not attract “strong feelings”, although arguably the latter does not feature in research methodology.

Finally, more than anything else, we certainly need, in my opinion, to continue the open debate about the future development of our discipline as Michael Baker suggests.
References


