MARKETING RESEARCH: TO SERVE WHAT PURPOSES?

Elizabeth C. Hirschman, New York University, New York City

INTRODUCTION

A normative issue of continuing interest and debate within the marketing community is the purpose to be served by marketing research. This is usually presented as a dichotomous choice between conducting research which pursues knowledge for knowledge sake (often termed basic, academic, pure, or positive) versus research that is conducted to solve the problems facing marketing managers (often termed applied, pragmatic, managerially-relevant, engineering, or normative) (cf., Holbrook 1985a, b; Hirschman 1985; Hunt 1976; Hunt and Burnett 1982; Ryan 1986; Ryan and O'Shaughnessey 1987; Jacoby 1985; Hoornan and Zaltman 1985; Anderson 1983). Although recently somewhat more complex models of these distinctions have been put forward (cf., Brinberg and Hirschman 1988; Holbrook 1986), the debate over the purposes for which marketing research should be conducted is ideological and cannot be resolved by appeals to notions of validity (Brinberg and Hirschman 1986) nor by semantic categorizations (Holbrook 1986). The dispute over the ends to which marketing research should be directed ultimately may be one that is rooted in personal and collective research activities and in the research enterprise, and not in some tangible, exterior reality, nor in arbitrary semantic distinctions.

Recently, the American Marketing Association entered this perilous fray -- albeit unwittingly and without harmful intentions -- when, at a recent (September 1986) meeting of the A.M.A. Board of Directors, the following definition of marketing research was adopted:

"Marketing Research is the function which links the consumer, customer, and public to the marketer through information -- information used to identify and define marketing opportunities and problems; generate, refine, and evaluate marketing actions; monitor marketing performance; and improve understanding of marketing as a process. Marketing Research specifies the information required to address these issues; designs the method for collecting the information; manages and implements the data collection process; analyzes the results; and communicates the findings and their implications."

During the discussion prior to voting on this definition, objections to the wording were expressed by three academicians (Professors Elizabeth Hirschman, Robert Lusch, William Perreault) who subsequently voted against acceptance. Primarily, their objections centered around the definition's emphasis on the managerial orientation of marketing research to the apparent exclusion of research conducted for the purpose of public policy formulation, humanistic comprehension, theory development, and macro analysis. The definition, as it currently stands, appeared (to these dissenters) to view only pragmatically-directed inquiry as appropriate for the term marketing research.

Although the issue outlined above is primarily couched in terms of semantics, it is important to realize that words may have great impact on how a field of inquiry comes to view itself, its goals, and its substance. Marketing scholars whose research activities do not fall into the domain designated by the newly-adopted definition of marketing research may come to view themselves -- and be viewed by others -- as not practicing marketing research.

As one of the three board members who dissented from accepting this definition for marketing research, I would like to explain my reasoning, and to use this opportunity to put forward a rationale as to why academic marketing research is and must be a distinct system of inquiry from the research conducted for and by marketing management.

Marketing Research From a Managerial Perspective

Almost from its inception the academic investigation of marketing concerned itself with the pragmatic problems of commercial enterprise (cf., Wrigth and Dimodale 1978). Even those marketing academicians widely recognized as theoretically creative and motivated to bring scientific status to marketing inquiry often viewed marketing as inherently managerially oriented in its subject matter (cf., Alderson 1957). Within this perspective, the intrinsic value of marketing as both a profession and as the discipline lies in its facilitation of marketing management function(s).

Perhaps ironically, it was in the writings of one of the foremost marketing management theorists that ideas were first expressed that now have grown to become the countervailing ideological perspective (Kotler 1978; Kotler 1972; Kotler and Levy 1969; Kotler 1984). The concept of marketing as a generic activity that transcends the boundaries of commercial enterprise, that contains abstract elements of interpersonal exchange as its core activity, and that has societal impact and implications for human welfare have served to restructure and ultimately redirect marketing ideology.

Those thoughts, which have served to substantially deepen and broaden marketing research and elevate its status intellectually, have also provided the seeds for an opposing ideology that, I believe, should replace the traditional norm of managerial relevance. Now that marketing has come to be viewed as a set of exchange activities between two or more social entities, now that its domain has become broadened to noncapitalist organisations, and now that its potential for destructive as well as constructive social outcomes has become acknowledged within the discipline's ideology, the norm of managerial relevance is no longer appropriate.

It has become possible, ideologically, for academicians to conduct their inquiries without taking the point-of-view of the practicing marketing manager as their central focus for problem definition. It has become possible, ideologically, for marketing academicians to pursue knowledge for its own sake, without regard for its practical relevance to marketing management. This ideology, which I support, proposes that the norm of knowledge for knowledge sake become the accepted motive for justifying academic marketing inquiry and that the motive of managerial relevance be shifted entirely to practitioners for whom it is appropriate. (cf., Holbrook 1985a, b; Hirschman 1986; Hunt and Burnett 1982). However, any proposed shift in the motives and norms for conducting academic marketing research must take into account the potential costs involved. In moving from an ideology of managerial relevance to one of knowledge for knowledge sake we will lose some benefits we currently possess. Let us consider these.

A Consistent Worldview

One of the intellectually pragmatic advantages of maintaining managerial relevance as the dominant motive for acad-
mic marketing research is that it provides a consistent worldview or reality against which comparisons can be made. The Weltanschauung of the practicing marketing manager becomes the backdrop against which research inquiry can be directed toward the manager's perspective of marketing problems, their causes, their relative priority in importance, and the utility of solutions developed for them provides a consistent template against which academic studies can be evaluated.

The current usefulness of the managerial perspective as a consistent reality for framing academic research is indicated by its common use as symbolizing the 'real world'. Testing marketing theory against the real world, as alluded to in many writings (cf. Jacoby 1985), usually means the world as the manager sees it. If the managerial perspective is accepted as most representative of the real world, then a consistent framework for evaluation can be utilized. Valuable academic marketing research can then be defined as that which is directed toward and succeeds in finding solutions to the real world problems of the marketing manager. Academic marketing research which is not directed toward solving problems relevant to the real world of the marketing manager, or which does not develop constructive solutions, is not valuable. Thus, a consistent set of criteria for research conduct and evaluation is established that can be disseminated within and practiced by the marketing academic community.

There are several intellectual benefits derivable from such a 'one reality' perspective. First, communication among marketing academicians and between marketing academicians and marketing practitioners is enhanced. A common set of beliefs, values, goals and priorities exists within and between the two communities. Second, the adoption of such an internal consistency may lead to more rapid progress in developing an overarching paradigm for the discipline, together with a set of general principles and accepted axioms (Hunt 1985). Third, a common set of standards would exist for evaluation to those problems in the field such that constructive inquiry paths could be more readily identified and pursued, whereas less productive paths could be halted before additional resources were expended on them.

Marketing Science as a Producer of Knowledge for the Sake of Knowledge

As noted earlier, a segment of marketing academicians, to which I belong, advocates the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. Moreover, in the extreme, with negative regard for managerial relevance (cf. Holbrook 1985 b). Although academicians with this normative predisposition have been present since the field's inception, their numbers have grown in years and their publications have more fervently advocated supremacy of the scholarly norm (cf. Ryan 1986; Holbrook 1986; Hirschman 1986; Wallendorf 1986; Anderson 1983; Hunt 1985). It is possible that among members of marketing's invisible college, persons who adhere to the knowledge for knowledge sake norm may even constitute a majority.1 If correct, this would signal a normative shift within marketing, as previously its orientation has been described as pro-managerial (cf. O'Shaughnessy and Ryan 1979) and the majority of current marketing textbooks have an applied/managerial focus (cf. Kotler 1984; Berkowitz, Kerin, Redelius 1986; Stanton 1981).

It is probably not coincidental that this normative shift is occurring at a time when important metaphysical questions (i.e., positivism vs. humanism) are also being raised within the field, and in fact the movements toward humanism and toward the knowledge-for-knowledge's sake norm are to some extent mutually reinforcing. Under positivism, there is deemed to exist one Truth, which is independent of the perspective of the observer and can be arrived at by observation and deductive reasoning regardless of where one starts. Hence, searching for that Truth from the point of view of the marketing manager would be as constructive as beginning from any other starting point — ultimately Truth would be obtained. Further, the norm of managerial relevance also assures that the path to discovery of Truth would result in useful knowledge for an important constituency of marketing inquiry — the marketing manager.

However, the arousal of relativism and humanism as metaphysical alternatives has changed this situation. Under humanism, the marketing academician can envision multiple constructed truths, each dependent upon the point of view of the observer. In fact, the point of view of the observer is believed to determine in advance which Truth will be arrived at through inquiry. Thus, to humanistic marketing researchers, abandonment of the managerial perspective is justified by the belief that such a norm restricts inquiry to only one version (among many) of Truth, and, while it is not necessary to adopt an anti-managerial posturing in conducting one's inquiry, it is perhaps more constructive to utilize pluralistic vantage points (e.g., those of consumers, policy makers, special interest groups, etc.).

A favorite speculation of mine is that academic marketing researchers whose personal value system impels them toward the managerial perspective often possess a corresponding antipathy to commercialization, materialism, and profit-oriented enterprise, in general. Thus, to them, replacement of the norm of managerial relevance by one favoring the acquisition of knowledge-for-knowledge's sake is given impetus by moral imperative, as well as supported by metaphysical logic.2

If the norm of knowledge-for-knowledge's sake does become predominant among marketing academicians, as I and others advocate, what changes in content and structure can be anticipated? Perhaps one of the first content-type changes evident in the field would be a decline in the volume of consulting activity and a corresponding reduction in the quantity of articles published in marketing journals based upon consulting data. To offset this, there would have to be a corresponding increase in the proportion of academic marketing research funded by internal university grants and external governmental/public sector funding agencies, such as NSF, NEA, and NIMH. At the present time little effort has been made on the part of the marketing academic community to cultivate these funding sources, and it is clear that those of us advocating the knowledge-for-knowledge's sake norm will need to initiate contact with these sources, if the normative changeover is to be successful.3

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1 This speculation is derived from my experiences in various ACR and AMA organizational roles and not on any objective sampling of opinions.

2 The correspondence of moral and intellectual values opposing the managerial-relevance norm and favoring that of knowledge-for-knowledge's sake is perhaps most evident in the writings of Holbrook (1985a, b, 1986).

3 In this regard, it is interesting to note that one of the principal knowledge-for-knowledge's sake advocates, Russ Belk, used a coalition of 'creative financing' sources to fund the 1986 Consumer Behavior Odyssey, including university grants, advertising agency donations, private institute endowments and the Odyssey participants' personal funds.
If this alteration in normative perspective and funding sources did occur, the content of articles published in marketing journals would likely come much more to resemble the type found in such journals as the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, Psychometrika, American Sociological Review and Social Forces and to resemble less those found in the Journal of Business, Harvard Business Review, and the Journal of Accounting. The published output of academic marketing research would come to resemble more that of the 'scholarly' social sciences than the 'commercial' business school disciplines. In essence, this is the crux of the normative dilemma confronting the academic marketing community: are we a collective of social scientists pursuing knowledge-for-knowledge-sake or a collective of applied researchers seeking to solve the problems confronting business? (I, obviously, favor the former alternative).

A shift in the field toward knowledge-for-knowledge-sake would also bring about alterations in the current content of marketing courses, textbooks and degree programs. First, marketing management functional and decision areas would receive less emphasis, than is currently the case. For example, courses in new product development, sales force management, and advertising management would be deemed less important, because they primarily reflect a managerial point of view and do not address issues of societal welfare or assist the accumulation of general knowledge. Conversely, courses on topics such as marketing and society, exchange theory, distribution channels as political economies, and the ethics of consumption would receive increased emphasis, because they approach marketing from a social science perspective, rather than as a commercial activity. Consumers would be viewed as resource exchange participants, rather than as buyers, purchasers, or targets; indicators of social welfare or societal benefits would replace sales, profits, and market share as key criteria for evaluating the utility of marketing activities.

A shift in normative emphasis would also likely change the proportion of resources directed toward various graduate degree programs. If the academic marketing community became committed to the norm of knowledge-for-knowledge-sake, then it is probable that greater importance would be placed on the training of doctoral-level students, as opposed to those seeking the MBA degree. A field whose normative commitment is toward managerial-relevance logically views its primary educational duty as the training of business executives, i.e., MBA's. Conversely, a field whose normative goal is to pursue knowledge for its own sake logically will view its primary educational duty as the education of scholar/scientists, i.e., Ph.D's. The analogy to the social science model is again appropriate — typically, advanced degree programs in, say, psychology and sociology are oriented both in numbers and resources towards producing Ph. D level graduates and not Masters level graduates.4

A widespread shift to the knowledge-for-knowledge-sake norm within the marketing academic community could also lead to a potential rift within the AMA. The Education Division, which is composed entirely of academicians but comprises only 15% of the AMA membership, might attempt to dissociate its activities from the managerial orientation of the majority of the AMA members. This possibility raises a final point regarding the consequences of a normative shift: the identification of sources of resistance to such a shift. There are groups both within and outside the marketing academic community which logically would view such a normative transition as contrary to their interests and who would be likely to actively oppose it. Within the academic community strenuous opposition would be expected from those who are now heavily engaged in consulting activities for marketing companies. A changeover to a knowledge-for-knowledge-sake normative emphasis would cause such consulting activities — and those who engaged in them — to lose status within the academic community. Further, the academic publication utility of data collected during consulting activities would also decline, due to the devaluing of managerial-relevance as a frame for academic investigations. Thus, consulting academics would face three costs as a result of a normative shift: (1) the loss of income, (2) the loss of personal prestige, and (3) the loss of data utility. Hence, from the perspective of professional self-preservation, they would be justified in opposing such a shift.

The second major source of resistance can be expected to come from practitioner members of professional associations having a marketing orientation. These could include practitioner members of organizations such as ACR and ORSA-TIMS, but most likely resistance would be centered within practitioner-dominated organizations, such as the AMA. The threat to these individuals is that their financial support of academic marketing research projects through these organizations would no longer result in research efforts that were directed primarily toward managerially-relevant issues. Rather, their support would help to fund studies that were being undertaken for the furtherance of general marketing knowledge — and there would be no guarantee that the results would soon, if ever, be useful to the practitioner. Faced with this dilemma, many practitioner members may pressure these associations to influence marketing academics to maintain predominance of the managerially-relevant perspective or, if that is not successful, withdraw funding support for academic research via these organizations.

**BEFORE COSTS, AND THE BOTTOM LINE**

The pursuit of knowledge-for-knowledge-sake will cause our field to lose some important benefits it now enjoys — incur some heavy costs it has not encountered previously. Why then, do I encourage the adoption of the norm and the rejection of managerial-relevance? Because I believe that there is a larger goal to which we as individual scientists and as a collective field of inquiry should aspire. That goal is to apply our energies and our talents toward the generation of knowledge that is maximally beneficial to society, as a whole, and not just one, already powerful, sector of that society.

The academic realm, to me, is one which is purposely set apart from the business of everyday life. From our unique vantage point, we are given the opportunity — if we only would choose to exercise it — to examine the workings of the marketing system from perspectives unfettered by concern for corporate profitability, competitive actions, and promotional effectiveness.

To me the bottom line is that we, as academic marketing researchers, should be most concerned with is not the corporate bottom line of marketing management, but rather the human bottom line of societal welfare. It is to that bottom line that we have the most opportunity to make a genuinely impactful contribution — one that can be calculated not in dollars and cents, but rather in such currencies as self-satisfaction.
Knowledge for Knowledge's Sake

Marketing must be more concerned with the pursuit of knowledge as knowledge...Society tends to reserve full scientific legitimacy for those inquiry systems which are perceived to be operating in the higher interests of knowledge and general social welfare...The interest must lie in understanding and explaining the phenomenon itself, rather than understanding it from the perspective of only one of the participants.

Anderson, 1983, pp. 27-28

Even if marketing should never generate a general theory of its own, the pursuit of such a general theory, like the pursuit of truth in general, would still be a worthy quest.

Hunt, 1983, p. 16

When business calls...and urges us to eschew the unfettered pursuit of truth in order to seek commercial gain, it extracts its pound of flesh. It turns our vision away from something honest and pure and toward something slightly soiled by self-interest and acquisitiveness.

Holbrook 1985 a, p. 14

Research which places managerial utility ahead of intellectual curiosity subverts marketing and consumer behavior as sciences; it makes a craftsman of the researcher and degrades the intrinsic value of the knowledge produced.

Hirschman 1986, p. 435

Knowledge to Assist Marketing Practice

A second important barrier is the failure of many academics to make the problem they are addressing is, in fact, relevant when compared to the other problems facing practitioners. When practitioners see equal treatment being given to a trivial problem and one of major importance, they tend to discount the output of all academics.


Marketing educators and university administrators must be made aware of the crucial need to maintain open lines of communication with professional researchers and practicing managers. They should be persuaded to support teaching, consulting, and research activities that foster this communication and involve real-world marketing problems.


[My present view is that marketing would not exist as a separate field of study except to promote practical objectives, and that any theory that will provide a useful perspective for this field is necessarily pragmatic.


It is particularly important in the Marketing Programs section, to discuss the managerial implications of research.... Too few researchers discuss their research with practitioners and even fewer involve them in the project, for example, as 'feasibility advisers'...

Cunningham and Enis 1983, p. 6

REFERENCES


