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The Four Faces of Commodification in the Development of Marketing Knowledge

Introduction

I welcome the publication of a special issue of the *Journal of Marketing Management* devoted to questions surrounding "The Commodification of Marketing Knowledge" because I believe that this theme strikes at the heart of forces that have begun to rob marketing academia of its joy, to distort its priorities, to trivialize its intellectual content, and ultimately to reduce much of what passes for marketing scholarship to the level of breakfast cereal for the mind, if not a sort of mushy and easily digested pabulum. I have argued for various aspects of these impressions in diverse settings — to which I shall make brief but specific references in what follows — but the general tone of my concerns emerged in the report of the AMA Task Force (1988), of which I was a member and on which I argued long and with ultimately persuasive effect for the kind of depressing if prophetic conclusions cited by the editors of this special issue as a basis for the points they raise in their own provocative position paper (Brownlie and Saren, this issue). The special issue provides a salubrious opportunity to revisit some of these concerns, to add some personal reflections that have accumulated since the work of the Task Force almost a decade ago, to support these with some further anecdotal evidence, and to do whatever I can to refocus an overall picture that looked very bleak in, say, 1986 to make it look, if anything, even bleaker today.

Commodification Run Rampant

Let us begin with a brief consideration of our central theme regarding "The Commodification of Marketing Knowledge". In the context of our present concerns, following Brownlie and Saren, we may define *commodification* as the process or custom of treating some object (a person, place, thing, event, idea or whatever) as "a commodity to be shaped, packaged, distributed and marketed". But this definition has the unfortunate property of at least partially including the term to be defined — namely, "commodity". Hence, to elaborate, I shall take *commodity* in this context as a reference to any object whatsoever that is offered to any market whatsoever in exchange for any extrinsic reward whatsoever. Obviously, the extrinsic reward could take the form of a simple monetary payoff — simple money offered in an appeal to greed, for example. But also, such rewards could appear as incentives associated with

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career advancement (the quest for promotion and tenure), with research funding (support by industry–university partnerships or by lucrative consulting contracts), with administrative approval (excellence in the classroom as documented by favourable teacher ratings), or with celebrity status (fame as the author of a best-selling textbook).

My central claims are, first, that any such form of commodification tends inevitably to dilute, to distort, to demean, or otherwise to degrade the aspect of knowledge that it affects and, second, that all such kinds of commodification are rampant in the academic field of marketing today.

I hasten to add that I speak primarily from my local viewpoint as an American devoted to academic research on consumer behaviour. Hence, my perspective fails to embrace all types of marketing knowledge among all interested participants in every region of the world. There may exist some marketing scholar studying, say, mail-order retailing in, say, Outer Mongolia who has felt none of the ill-effects from commodification to which I shall refer (though I doubt it). Nonetheless, whatever its local limitations, I suspect that the viewpoint I express has some resonance around a wider sphere of interest and, indeed, that this resonance helps to explain the reasons behind the need for the special issue at hand. Specifically, from my admittedly parochial position as a Professor of Marketing in New York City, I wish to suggest at least four ways in which commodification has misdirected the progress of knowledge in marketing with the result that our discipline remains retarded in its development, stunted in its growth, or (if we wish to be politically correct about it) intellectually challenged in ways that many members of the academic community have reason to find embarrassing.

The four faces of commodification to which I shall draw attention concern four aspects of how different markets for ideas place demands on the creation of intellectual offerings in ways that tend inevitably to distort and potentially to corrupt the production of marketing knowledge. I shall summarize these four themes under the following headings:

— The Review Process as a Quality Control Function at the Major Marketing Journals.
— Managers as Customers.
— Students as Consumers.
— The Mass Market as a Target Audience.

Each of these four themes has troubled me deeply over the course of the last decade. I have complained both in public presentations and in print on each topic — though less loudly and less visibly than might have happened if my views were not so disquieting to many of the key players among the various constituencies involved. Ultimately, many but not all of my concerns have surfaced in a recent book on Consumer Research (Holbrook 1995a). But that volume addresses numerous interrelated issues not of concern here while omitting several matters of strong relevance to the present focus. I therefore wish to summarize my positions on the four faces of commodification in a manner that will make them both clear and available for debate by others.
The Review Process as a Quality Control Function at the Major Marketing Journals

First, as adumbrated by the editors, I join the AMA Task Force (1988) in regarding the “adversarial review process” that prevails at our major American marketing journals as the source of a profoundly “demoralizing effect on the research aspirations of academics” (Brownlie and Saren, this issue). Here, as Brownlie and Saren note, the damaging force of commodification results from the role of reviewers as a privileged quality-conscious market for the intellectual products of researchers desperate to please their customers by meeting their quality control criteria in ways that will satisfy the pressure to publish toward the goal of advancing their academic careers by achieving the credentials needed for promotion and tenure. Clearly, this situation places extraordinary — indeed, absolute — power into the hands of the reviewers and the editors who preside over them. But you know what they say about power. And corruption.

I traced some ill-effects of excessive power bestowed upon journal reviewers in a piece entitled “A Note on Sadomasochism in the Review Process: I Hate When That Happens” (Holbrook 1986a). At the time, my critique of the review process produced an outpouring of empathetic support from fellow marketing academics, the likes of which I have not encountered before or since. The effect resembled that of giving a mental enema to a whole generation of intellectually constipated colleagues and fellow travellers. There followed, first, relief and, then, appreciation. But, in retrospect, I now realize that — though critical and even a little testy — my comments were much too nice and far too moderate in the tone they took toward the review process. Indeed, I now believe that the inherently commodified review process — as practiced at virtually all of the top-ranking American marketing-related journals — is fundamentally rotten and corrupt to its very core.

I say this, by the way, as one who is deeply involved as a sometime editor, a frequent reviewer, and an eagerly aspiring author. Hence, any guilt that needs affixing attaches as much to me as to anyone else. And, in my view, such guilt is Big and Getting Bigger.

These problems surfaced most recently in a special topic session on Ethical Issues in Consumer Research chaired by Jack Jacoby (1994) at the Fall 1993 Conference of the Association for Consumer Research. As part of that session, I presented a paper that focused on a number of “Ethical Issues” in general and on “Ethics in the Review Process” in particular (Holbrook 1994). In the latter connection, I drew heavily on a critique published by David Goodstein (1992) — a Professor of Physics and Vice Provost at the California Institute of Technology — in the august pages of Science. Paraphrasing Goodstein’s argument and translating it to the context of academic research in marketing produces the following logical chain:

— Those evaluating cases for promotion or tenure in our field typically count publications in the most prestigious marketing-related journals (JM, JMR, JCR, JCP, MS, etc.);
— Those journals are so prestigious partly because they reject over 85% of the manuscripts submitted;
— The editors who make these rejection decisions are overworked, underpaid, and inadequate to the task of judging all the submissions by themselves;
— These editors therefore rely on the advice of referees who participate on the
condition of anonymity but whose credentials reflect their status as authors potentially competing with those whose work they are reviewing;
— These reviewers have themselves been the victims of unfairness in the review process (typically in the recent past);
— They may therefore engage in retaliatory unethical behaviour (such as rejecting work that they know has merit or dragging out the process for so long as to debilitate a rival author);
— The result is a vicious cycle of unethical and destructive repercussions via a self-damaging feedback loop wherein wronged authors in turn become rapacious reviewers of other people’s work.

In my view, only one corrective step can adequately address this vicious cycle of unethical misconduct as it has corrupted the review process at the major American marketing journals. Specifically, referees must be required to sign their names to their reviews. Only by stripping away their protective veil of anonymity — only by lifting the shroud of secrecy — can we expect to obtain intellectually honest reviews by reviewers whose integrity matches their industry in finding flaws. I realize that this prescription will find few adherents in the field of marketing — where the journalistic forces of blindness are so firmly entrenched as to defy easy dislocation — but it has begun to win endorsement in a number of other scientific disciplines (Cummings and Frost 1985; Chubin and Hackett 1990; Lock 1991). Until we take steps to penetrate the darkness that hides the leering face of sadomasochism in the review process at our major journals of marketing and consumer behaviour, I do not see how we can hold our heads high in the academic community.

Managers as Customers

A second manner in which the commodification of marketing knowledge proceeds apace in the academic community — with potentially untoward effects — concerns the issue of how and why such research gets funded. In recent years, as government-subsidized sources of money for research in US universities have begun to dry up, these academic institutions in general and business schools in particular have turned increasingly for financial support to various sorts of industrial partnerships, corporate sponsors, and consulting relationships. This trend helps to answer the how question concerning research funding. A response to the why question hinges on two words that I believe have served as an insidious shibboleth for those seeking to evaluate the extent to which academic research deserves their support — namely, Managerial Relevance.

In logic worthy of Newt Gingrich, those wondering whether to put their money behind academic research in marketing ask the perennially banal question: What’s in it for me? What will I get out of it? For managers, the answer lies in a hope that the research will provide information that will enable them better to manage, better to make marketing decisions, and therefore better to generate profits. Clearly, university professors who wish to play this game must seek to identify the sorts of findings that marketing managers would deem relevant and must set their research priorities accordingly. In other words: those who pay the piper call the tune. Or, when somebody else holds the purse strings, many marketing academics will commodify their research by selling out.
I have inveighed against this situation on several occasions — usually with the result of provoking hostile responses from those who consider themselves the representatives of management. For example, in "The Consumer Researcher Visits Radio City: Dancing in the Dark" (Holbrook 1985a), I railed against the commercialization of consumer research by comparing the consumer researcher who aims only to please an audience of marketing managers (by focusing on applied rather than basic research) with Professor Immanuel Rath (Emil Jennings), who aims only to please his materialistic paramour Lola Lola (Marlene Dietrich) in The Blue Angel and who ultimately prostitutes his intellectual gifts by catering to her boorish clientele. Somewhat more politely, in "Why Business Is Bad For Consumer Research" (Holbrook 1985b), I suggested that basic or pure consumer research (in contrast to applied marketing research) thrives best when pursued with joy as an intrinsically motivated end in itself valued for its own sake (rather than prized for its extrinsically motivated contributions to business profitability) and argued that consulting or other industrial partnerships could dampen such joyful mainsprings of academic creativity. In "Whither ACR? Some Pastoral Reflections on Bears, Baltimore, Baseball, and Resurrecting Consumer Research" (Holbrook 1986b), I further developed this contrast between applied and pure research by means of a metaphor drawn from baseball and through examples of how the commercialization of professional sports (like the commodification of academic research) threatens to rob the game of baseball (like the game of consumer research) of joyful participation by those imbued with the creative spirit of play (say, the great Yankee left-fielder Lou Piniella) by replacing such devoted players with those primarily concerned about the gigantic salaries to be earned from ever-larger compensation packages (say, the mercenary designated hitter Danny Tartabull).

According to this view, one consequence of the quest for managerial relevance in the service of financial reward is that this commodification of marketing knowledge tends to stifle creative, intrinsically motivated efforts prompted by a fun-based love of research — thereby leading to the sorts of dysfunctional career paths lamented in the report by the AMA Task Force (1988; Bloom et al. 1987). Clearly, in pursuing this theme, the Task Force report reflected the university-oriented biases of those seeking to advance the cause of academic science and scholarship. It therefore inspired hostile attacks of the type voiced by the then-director of the Marketing Science Institute (Webster 1988) to the effect that the Task Force members had renounced their obligations to the needs of the marketing community, were wallowing in the sins of managerial irrelevance, and should be chastised for their failure to be useful. I replied with one more metaphorical elaboration based on a contrast between the personalities of dogs and cats (Holbrook 1989a, 1993). In this comparison, dogs are obedient, anxious to please their masters, willing to perform tricks in order to earn the reward of praise, and only too happy to go fetch the newspaper or to point toward various objects of interest. By contrast, cats are individualistic, mostly anxious to please themselves, willing to do only what suits their own natures, and inclined to sleep peacefully curled up in the corner rather than catering to the whims of the lords and ladies of the manor. Applied research of the managerially relevant variety lends itself to the canine temperaments of marketing researchers anxious to go fetch like a Golden Retriever or to point like an Irish Setter. By contrast, truly individualistic scientists and scholars — lovers of academic freedom — tend to be feline in their inclinations and refuse to fetch obediently the data that managers want
or to point helpfully toward information of relevance to marketing decisions. Hence, pure academic researchers tend to regard the propensities of managerially inclined marketing researchers as dogmatic, while the latter tend to regard those of the former as catastrophic. And never the twain shall meet. Indeed, this true dilemma lies at the heart of most academic research conducted in any school of business. Attempts to wish it away or to evade it with self-denying sophistry (Pechmann 1990) can only obfuscate a pervasive problem endemic to the life of a marketing scholar (Holbrook 1990).

My own proclivities in this debate lean strongly toward the side of academic freedom, of basic consumer research or pure research in marketing pursued for its own sake as an end in itself, and of intellectual priorities untouched by potentially distorting pressures toward managerial relevance, toward pragmatically applicable marketing science, or toward scholarship sullied by corrupting influences due to the commodification of knowledge. However, I am well aware that many colleagues disagree with my advocacy of basic or pure academic research at the expense of managerially oriented applications. Presumably, each side of this controversy is entitled to its own opinion. But what especially worries me is how seldom this debate is heard in serious dialogue among members of the faculties at our schools of business. In other branches of the university — say, genetics, engineering, biology, physics, or computer sciences — professional researchers and school administrators do show strong concerns for what will happen to academic freedom as commercial interests increasingly interfere with the unfettered selection of research priorities via the pressures brought to bear by industrial partnerships and the like (Langfitt et al. 1983). By contrast, in schools of business, we simply acquiesce in the setting of academic priorities by an external constituency composed of self-interested, profit-oriented, and all-too-often greedy capitalists. Indeed, we are so accustomed to this pervasive climate that — like fish in water — we do not even notice it. In other words, through dangerous inattentiveness bordering on indifference, we simply take the commodification of marketing knowledge for granted.

**Students as Consumers**

As clearly indicated in the recent book entitled *The Authority of the Consumer* and edited by Keat *et al.* (1994), we have moved increasingly into an era when the beneficiaries of such supposedly professional services as medicine, law, the arts, religion, politics, or (especially) education are increasingly regarded less as patients, defendants, connoisseurs, parishioners, citizens, or (notably) students and more as consumers. This ubiquitous shift in our prevailing attitude toward the service-client relationship — this empowerment of the consumer — has been lamented by such commentators as Schwartz (1994), Shorris (1994), and Jacobson and Mazur (1995) precisely because it leads directly toward the potentially degrading commercialization of the various services in general and, in the case of education, toward the commodification of knowledge in particular.

I might best illustrate this problem with a case example that recently inspired a rather passionate outpouring of personal reflections on the process of marketing education (Holbrook and Day 1994). This illustration pertains to a large business school in the Northeastern United States. Like other American schools of business,
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this institution has lately found itself surrounded by a climate in which opinion polls such as those published by Business Week and by U.S. News & World Report place academic administrators under tough and ever-growing pressure to remain competitive in the educational marketplace. This, of course, means finding bigger and better ways to please the target population of student-consumers, now viewed unapologetically (if condescendingly) as customers of educational services or (even worse) as buyers of MBA degrees. One way to target such customer-oriented appeals is to convince the student-consumers that they are acquiring exactly those tools of knowledge needed for business success in their careers (pure extrinsic motivation) and, better yet, that they are accomplishing this in a social atmosphere that feels as warm, welcoming, and wonderful as possible (pure hedonic gratification). Moreover, like any good marketing campaign, such a commercializing of education — what Schwartz (1994) calls its instrumentalization — should be launched with all the fanfare and hoopla that the most extravagant public relations efforts can attain.

The business school in question responded to this challenge by undertaking a complete and eminently newsworthy revision of its core curriculum. Toward this end, the members of a specially appointed committee decided that 10 classes (fully half the MBA programme) — including the basic marketing course (an introduction to marketing strategy that had formerly been optional but had been taken by about 90% of the students) — must now be required (to give all students the essential tools for business success). Further, to make the educational experience as user-friendly as possible for all concerned (while copying a somewhat more prestigious school located in a nearby city), student-consumers would henceforth be randomly grouped into clusters of 50 people who would take all of their 10 required core courses together (thereby making it easy for the most withdrawn, non-gregarious, or even sociopathic members of a cluster to make at least a few friends along the way). (Here, in the throes of their drive toward imitation, members of the planning committee neglected to check with colleagues at the competing institution where — it later turned out — the teachers were miserable with that school’s experimental clustering programme.)

Pretty soon, someone realized that the two steps just described (first, treating 10 courses as required and, second, clustering students) would necessitate the random assignment of clusters to instructors, thereby producing an unintended consequence — namely, a need to standardize the core courses. After all, the logic went, it would not be fair, equitable, or otherwise customer-oriented to require one cluster of students to take, say, a marketing class taught by Professor W unless that class were exactly the same as those for each of the other clusters in sections taught by Professors X, Y and Z. Naturally, all this required the Marketing Division to rethink its introductory course.

Whereas Marketing Strategy had once been taught by numerous different professors using numerous different teaching styles and had been taken voluntarily by students choosing their instructors on the basis of preferences for those with compatible tastes in their teaching approaches, the course was now redesigned by some especially zealous members of the Marketing Division to be rammed down the throats of captive audiences in the form of an efficiency-engineered, mass-produced, pre-packaged offering — standardized in all details (syllabus, readings, lectures, cases, exams, overhead transparencies) and aimed at stamping out cookie-cutter
MBAs (all equipped with identical tool kits containing transcendentally egalitarian, predigested, coffee-spoon-sized bits and pieces of marketing wisdom). All this was carried forward in the utmost seriousness under the ostensible banner of enhancing academic standards. But, tacitly, it all reflected an impulse toward using the techniques of mass-marketing to appeal to a broadened audience of student-consumers.

At least one horrified faculty member opposed these changes in the curriculum as the closest thing he could imagine to organized intellectual anathema. At least one wrote several passionate memos objecting to the new core and pointing out that "standards" are not synonymous with "standardization". At least one stood up at the faculty meeting where his colleagues voted on the proposed curriculum changes, argued that the new marketing course and others like it aspired to the condition of a fast-food hamburger, wrote the label "McCourse" on the blackboard, and then sat there under his own satiric inscription while the rest of the faculty voted unanimously to implement the revised programme.

Thus was born a new introductory marketing course that — by standardizing its offering in an attempt to appeal to the average student-consumer — followed the widely discredited precepts of mass-marketing in a manner that, with supreme irony, created a required course in marketing strategy that is itself a shining embodiment of what most marketing thinkers regard as the single greatest marketing fallacy that it is possible to commit — namely, the fallacy of aiming a standardized offering at a market of customers assumed to be homogeneous in their needs and wants. Any reasonable marketing strategist would suggest that student-consumers differ (by training, by career objectives, by previous work experience, by temperament, by tastes), that instructors vary in their respective strengths (by training, by research interests, by teaching experience, by temperament, by characteristic styles of presentation), and therefore that the optimum strategy entails the design of a system that will facilitate a match between students and teachers by allowing inherently heterogeneous "segments" of student-consumers to select those "offerings" of various instructor-producers that they happen to find most appealing. In other words, the closest attainable approximation to an optimal marketing strategy was the system that prevailed before the curriculum revision.

Thus did a misguided attempt to treat students as consumers produce a commodification of marketing knowledge that, as an unintended consequence, contradicted its own ostensible purposes. With inescapable irony, an intrinsically anti-intellectual attempt to commercialize academic training created an educational monster that — by the force of its own internal inconsistencies — failed to achieve popularity with the very student-consumers whom it sought to please. In short, it self-deconstructed. Quite understandably, given their penchant for academic freedom, instructors hated the straitjacketing standardized structure; in agony, one resigned from his position at the school; others simply found ways to avoid teaching the new course. The members of the class clusters — especially those who really were academically motivated, intellectually involved students as opposed to merely banausic tool-kit customers — loathed taking the standardized introduction to marketing even more than the professors disliked teaching it. (Indeed, their organization by clusters helped them communicate these feelings with ultra-visible urgency.) The upshot is that — through the force of its own self-de(con)structive inconsistencies, through its self-contradictory instantiation of the same misguided
mass-market thinking that doomed the Model T Ford — the introduction-to-
strategy course just described has become an embarrassment to the marketing
division that created it and even to the business school that mandated its
creation.

The moral, of course, is that academic programmes in general and individual
courses in particular should be designed to foster the acquisition of knowledge
pursued as an end in itself by students intrinsically motivated to seek the intellectual
rewards stemming from its pursuit. Any attempt to commercialize academic training
by pandering to audience popularity and by treating the relevant clients as
customers rather than as students can only produce a cheapening of the educational
process. In the present case, the effort to court favour with student-consumers by
designing a standardized MBA tool kit of ideas produced an offering that has
betrayed the academic standards it pretended to uphold. Paradoxically, marketing
academics have appeared all too eager to ignore their own most profound teachings.
Like the cobbler’s children, who must go without shoes, the proverbial student-
consumers have become student-victims. They are required en masse to take a
marketing course that is itself the supreme embodiment of the greatest marketing
fallacy ever known.

The Mass Market as a Target Audience

Finally, we might ask what happens when the marketing academic seeks to
commercialize marketing knowledge by appropriating the ideas of others, simplifying
and systematizing these ideas, dressing them up as a pretty parade of displays
and exhibits, covering them with a delicious candy coating, and in general rendering
them easily accessible and painlessly palatable to a large audience of only minimally
interested onlookers (a term that, in the USA, is perhaps more accurate than
“readers” since virtually nobody reads any more). In short, what happens when
marketing academics write textbooks aimed at college sophomores?

I should begin by emphasizing that I happen to admire the skills of anyone who
can creatively shape and organize a voluminous amount of information into the
form of a readily digested textbook — especially after having failed ignominiously
(as we shall see) in my one attempt to accomplish something along these lines.
However, as noted by Brownlie and Saren, a stigma does attach to textbook writing
insofar as such efforts amount to little more than attempts to “re-package the ideas
of original authors” in ways that will appeal to a broad or even global audience.

Unfortunately, from bitter personal experience, I am now prepared to concede that
— except in the rarest of cases (Kotler?, Aaker?, Urban?, Howard?) — the
commercial forces at work in the publishing industry appear certain to insure the
degradation of any marketing knowledge that might otherwise find its way into our
textbooks. I touched on this theme recently in my Fellows Address at the Fall 1994
ACR Conference when I called attention to the treatment of the publishing business
found in such films as Misery, Manhattan Murder Mystery, and Wolf (Holbrook 1995b).
Many in my audience might have wondered what chip on my shoulder — what
smoldering grudge — would inspire me to make such unflattering comments about
an industry wherein many marketing academics earn a substantial portion of their
livelihoods. The answer is sheer frustration over a debilitating and enervating
episode that cluttered up my life for a couple of years and that left me completely disillusioned concerning the merits of textbook publishing. I shall comment briefly on this episode — not because of the distress it caused me personally but because I believe it to be symptomatic of the evils that await even well-intentioned attempts to commodify marketing knowledge for the purpose of sharing it with a mass audience.

One day, I received a phone call from the new acquisitions editor in the area of marketing for a major world-renowned textbook house that I shall call Big Textbook Publisher or BTP for short. This marketing editor called upon our mutual acquaintance with her colleague at BTP (my former college roommate, a dear friend, and one of the finest people I have ever known) to request a meeting with me. I normally avoid catalogue-thumping, sales-oriented textbook people like the plague; but — bowing to the social dictates of the occasion — I invited Ms. Editor to visit me at my office, to attend my classes, and ultimately to engage in a long conversation during which her machinations began to unfold.

Briefly, her purpose was to persuade me to write a book for BTP. I replied, of course, that I do not write textbooks, do not want to write textbooks, and do not in fact possess the skills that would permit me to write textbooks even if I wanted to do so. She assured me that I was such a smart, famous, capable, and respected academic superstar that virtually any book I might care to write would be fine with her, because she was literally overwhelmed with desire to have something by me in her line of offerings to give it that extra sparkle and special glow that she so sincerely wanted to achieve and that only my illustrious name could provide. Flattered out of my wits by her sycophantic hyperbole concerning my vastly overstated credentials and therefore guilty of a supremely foolish hubris for which I subsequently paid a heavy price, I agreed to write an intentionally unconventional and idiosyncratic book about consumer research based on subjective personal introspective essays drawn from my own experiences and perspectives concerning the history of the field over the past quarter century. Amidst great celebratory fanfare, we signed a contract. But, acting on trust born of our mutual friendship with my old college chum, I barely bothered to read it.

Now that I was an official "BTP author", I began work on the project in earnest. Over the next several months — borrowing from various essays that had appeared in widely scattered places and weaving these together into a coherent chronological framework — I laboured mightily on the creation of my introspective history, aiming it always at what I took to be our target audience of advanced business undergraduates, marketing MBAs, PhDs in consumer behaviour, and interested colleagues in our discipline as well as in the other social sciences. Meanwhile, Ms. Editor busied herself in a frenzied intensification of her acquisitions activities. She toured the country, talking with my friends and collaborators (among others) at all the major institutions and (I am told) never forgetting to mention that, as one of her "BTP authors", I was writing a book on consumer research for her. Within a few months, she had succeeded in signing up at least 10 of my colleagues at other schools (and even one at my own school) to write marketing textbooks for BTP.

As I fed chapters to Ms. E. and her appointed copy editor, one at a time over the course of several months, I initially received warm encouragement and glowing praise. They especially liked the popularizations associated with my chatty tone, personal anecdotes, and liberal use of animal metaphors. But, as I worked my way
into some of the more philosophically challenging material, they began to express concern over whether my text would appeal to the typical college sophomore. Ultimately, for purposes of dumbing the book down to reach the lowest common denominator of sophomoric disinterest, they demanded a complete front-to-back revision to be presided over (word by word, comma by comma) by the copy editor. Trying to please, however foolishly, I then spent even more months than I had already invested following every detail of the copy editor's advice on revising the manuscript, seeking always to commodify it in a way that would attract the mass market that the editors apparently had in mind.

Perhaps inevitably, I failed to simplify, to water down, to make more accessible, and otherwise to degrade the manuscript sufficiently to suit the tastes of Ms. E. and the other textbook tycoons at BTP. In brief, after I had spent two unrequited years of hard labour on its creation, the acquisitions editor informed me summarily that she had decided not to publish my book because, in her judgment, it would not appeal to the typical college undergraduate. Disappointed (to put it mildly), I objected that her betrayal was both contractually illegal and morally reprehensible. She replied that the contract (which I had signed in trust) strongly favoured her side (which, indeed, turned out to be lamentably true) and that, as for the morals involved (surprising as it might seem), she simply did not care. In short, I was screwed — by Ms. E., by BTP, and even by the simpering copy editor who had repeatedly praised my prose even while she strenuously engaged in diluting it to a level suitable for an audience assumed to be functionally illiterate. (Here, I was then and am still reminded of a wonderful New Yorker cartoon by Shanahan that shows a little girl sitting behind a huge desk and solemnly informing a balding, bespectacled author bearing a strong resemblance to me that his manuscript reflects a "neat idea" but has "way too many big words").

I should add that — perhaps influenced by my furious letters to her superior officers at BTP, perhaps swayed by my empty threats of legal action, or perhaps frightened by distressed inquiries from my colleagues who had also signed what they had thought were viable contracts with her — Ms. E. did offer some valued assistance in placing the book with another publisher (one, I happily add, whose target market is considerably more scholarly in orientation than that of BTP). However, despite this eventually acceptable conclusion to my story, the saga of Ms. E. and BTP speaks volumes about basic issues concerning the role of the mass market in the development of marketing knowledge. Specifically, as illustrated by my misadventures with BTP, the role of the mass market — in textbooks, as elsewhere — is to erode, to eviscerate, or to emasculate the excellence of whatever it controls. Numerous commentators have remarked on this tendency as it affects the case of entertainment and the arts — as in Twitchell's (1992) acerbic account entitled Carnival Culture: The Trashing of Taste in America. Comparable views concerning education have appeared in the work of Fussell (1991), Hughes (1993), Henry (1994), and many others. In brief, the point is that appealing to a mass audience by giving people what they want forces one to dilute, to simplify, or to sugar coat ideas in an effort to make them more user-friendly and understandable. Any new truths that might otherwise contain tend to evaporate into the thin air of pandering made palatable and arguments rendered accessible by virtue of containing only that which is already known, comfortably easy, or reassuringly familiar.
Conclusions

What can we do in the face of such insidious threats to our academic integrity posed by the commodification of marketing knowledge? My central piece of advice is short but not sweet or painless: Admit Defeat.

Here, returning to the theme of baseball, I am reminded of the humiliation experienced by Mighty Casey in the famous poem by Ernest Lawrence Thayer. I once used this piece as the framework for a metaphorical treatment of the agonies involved in the enterprise of consumer research entitled "Casey at the Conference: Some Reflections on the ACR Experience" (Holbrook and Thayer 1985). Readers familiar with Thayer's poem will recall that it ends on a note of doom: "But there is no joy in Mudville — Mighty Casey has 'Struck Out'!". Indeed, when I gave my final lecture in the introductory marketing class that I had happily taught for 17 years before it was more or less standardized out from under me, I concluded with what I hope was an appropriately tear-jerking recitation of Casey at the Bat.

Can those of us who identify with Casey find any possible source of uplifting inspiration in all of this? In that connection, I have further pursued the baseball analogy by drawing an extended comparison between Johann Sebastian Bach and my great hero Mickey Mantle (Holbrook 1989b). Just as in our attempts to create marketing knowledge we fail over and over, Bach wrote hundreds of relatively undistinguished cantatas en route to creating a comparatively small number of true masterpieces (Jesu, der du meine Seele; Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott; Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme; Herz und Mund und Tat und Leben). Similarly, Mantle limped to the plate on gimpy knees and struck out with record-setting regularity, but — in the end, through stubborn determination — triumphed as one of the greatest battling champions of all time. Indeed, after his days as a ballplayer, Mantle's subsequent career has repeatedly pursued this path of defeat followed by heroically trying again — overcoming the stigma of a fleeting association with organized gambling, publicly fighting an alcohol addiction, and (most recently) bravely battling the medical exigencies of a liver transplant. Today, his Topps baseball card from the early 1950s is worth eight times its weight in gold.

As I write these concluding paragraphs, I am accompanied by our wonderful new kitten — a beautiful black Maine Coon cat — whom we named Rocky Raccoon after the Beatles song, but whom we call simply "Rocky", and who sprawls languorously across the window sill next to my desk, assisting me in every way he can by helpfully chewing on my pens or pencils, by sometimes rewriting whole paragraphs when he lays a gentle paw on my laptop keyboard, and generally by making sure that I remember to think about virtually anything but the task at hand. Earlier, I applauded the feline personality as an instructive parallel to the intrinsically motivated inquiring mind that gravitates toward the purest research. But, insistently, Rocky reminds me of another lesson that we must also learn from our cats. Repeatedly, he tries to jump up to a chair that his little legs are too short to reach; he misses and lands on his chin; he scrambles back and tries and fails again; ultimately, he finds a successful path to the soft cushion via a lower coffee table nearby. Thus does Rocky advance in his intrinsically motivated, curious, catlike, and quintessentially non-commercialized development of feline knowledge.

In this, J.S. Bach, M.C. Mantle, and R. Raccoon join forces to teach us the one lesson that can protect our discipline from ultimate destruction by the commodification of
marketing knowledge. True, the rapacious review process will mercilessly chop us down; impatient marketing managers will taunt us with nasty names; jaded student-consumers will cruelly eschew our sagest words of wisdom; and greedy publishers will exploit our most cherished ideas. Time and again, we will be defeated. And, at these painful moments, we can only recall the faint words that many of our mothers or fathers first taught us when we were even smaller than we are now — words that speak the truth even when they hurt like hell — words that were perhaps spoken to baby Johann, that may have been heard by young Mickey, and that almost miraculously are understood innately by even our little 4-month-old Rocky the Cat: If at first you don't succeed, try, try again.

Acknowledgement

The Author gratefully acknowledges the support of the Columbia Business School's Facility Research Fund.

References

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