Is marketing knowledge marketed? For Brownlie and Saren (this issue), the answer is "yes". They point to an "evolving market" for marketing knowledge, as well as an expanding number of producers, i.e. "academics, consultants, gurus, journalists, and students" and "proliferating forms of media" for promoting and distributing marketing knowledge. Their observations here seem indisputable. Indeed, knowledge claims have always been marketed. Consider Galileo (1564–1642). He distributed his knowledge claims regarding the heliocentric theory of Copernicus by means of a book, The Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems, and he promoted his views through presentations and letters to prominent individuals. Indeed, he argued for his views by using, among other things, the literary device of a dialogue that had the Church's Ptolemaic view advocated by "Simplicio", which implied that the Church's view was simple-minded. Subsequently, Galileo paid a price for his views (his silencing), as did those who believed him (they had to give up the comfort of a geocentric universe). Clearly, Galileo marketed his knowledge claims. Equally clearly, Galileo believed that the quality of his knowledge claims, his product, was such that they warranted his marketing efforts.

But what does the acknowledgement or recognition that marketing knowledge is marketed imply? For Brownlie and Saren (this issue), it seems to mean that marketing knowledge has become a "commodity" and marketing academics "can no longer automatically assume finally authority" to speak on marketing issues, but will "have to compete to assert their voice" using "a new armory of persuasion technologies". Also for them, journal editors and reviewers "police ideas", require "ritual obedience", and push marketing research into "a very narrow terrain of endeavour" that lacks "innovation" or "heretical" thinking. In short, it seems that for Brownlie and Saren, marketing's sky may not only be falling, but may have already crashed.

Brownlie and Saren are rightfully concerned about our discipline's overall health and their efforts to open a dialogue on this subject are commendable. Nonetheless, with respect to certain of the alleged implications of the marketing of marketing knowledge, we respectfully demur. If chemists in academe can share authority with those in DuPont and ICI, if academic accountants can share authority with public accounting firms, if academic petroleum engineers can share authority with those in Exxon and Royal Dutch Shell, why would it be problematic for marketing academics to share authority with marketing practitioners, consultants, and others? Indeed, has it not always been so? Have we ever had the "privileged position" of "final

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authority” that Brownlie and Saren now cry alarm over our supposedly losing? We think not.

Even though marketing academe has never had final authority over marketing matters (and hence cannot have lost it) and even though we have always had to compete with other knowledge producers for “shelf space” in the market for marketing knowledge, it could still be the case that whatever authority marketing academe has traditionally had is now eroding and that our competitors are gaining “market share”. Quite frankly, we do not know whether such an erosion in authority is taking place. But to those who believe it has and who find it disquieting, we suggest that reconsidering from whence authority comes would be useful.

The Sources of Authority

To say that one has authority to speak on an issue is to say that one, when speaking, will be believed. That is, the target of a communication (in our case the receiver of a marketing knowledge-claim) has confidence that the source is credible as a truth-teller, i.e. is trustworthy. On what bases then, do people determine the relative trustworthiness of different speakers? For the recipients of marketing knowledge claims, i.e. students, practitioners, policy makers, academics and the general public, we suggest that perceptions of trustworthiness stem from institutions, education, experience, method and values.

First, a speaker’s knowledge claims gain or lose credence by institutional affiliation. That is, the trustworthiness of an institution often transfers to the speaker. Ceteris paribus, a marketing academic gains authority by virtue of the trustworthiness of his or her university, and practitioners and consultants gain from the trustworthiness of their corporations and consulting companies, as in “Brand managers at P & G maintain that ...”. Second, formal education tends to confer trustworthiness. Degrees such as a PhD in marketing or an MBA signify for many people the degree of expertise of a speaker and, thus, inspire trust. Third, experience or “practical” education confers trustworthiness. Thus, we find such trust-engendering justifications as “My 30 years in marketing consumer electronics tells me that ...”. Fourth, trust can stem from the scientific method allegedly backing up a speaker’s claim. For example, “After conducting an experiment in five separate markets I find that ...”. Fifth, certain values believed to be held by a speaker can lead to perceptions of trustworthiness. In particular, the belief that a speaker holds objectivity in high regard inspires the trust of others. The norm of objectivity assures the listener that the speaker has an internal gyroscope that prohibits knowingly speaking falsehoods.

If the authority of marketing academe is eroding (or has already eroded), one contributing cause may be the continuing assault on all of academia. Scarcely a month goes by (at least in the USA) that some new book doesn’t call for a major restructuring, if not the wholesale dismantling, of higher education. Ironically, critics of universities point out that academics have delegitimized themselves. For several decades now, academic advocates of postmodernism, deconstructionism, neo-Marxism, “gender” feminism, Afrocentrism, relativism, subjectivism, and a host of other “isms” have been arguing that the search for truth plays no role (and cannot possibly play a role) in academic inquiry, that objectivity is impossible in academic
research (and/or may be undesirable), that all knowledge claims are equally true, equally false, and that all ethical systems are equally right, equally wrong. Therefore, argue advocates of postmodernism etc., since all academic inquiry is nothing more (and cannot be anything other) than political activity, then universities are political institutions and the only choice for academics is whether to engage in political activity for the "oppressors" or the "oppressed".

The irony is that to the extent that academic advocates of postmodernism etc., succeed in delegitimizing academe, they self-destroy. First, recall that at the founding of the University of Berlin in 1810 the German state granted academic freedom (academische Freiheit) to faculty on the condition that faculty maintain a commitment to the ideal of objective knowledge. This "grand compact" between society and universities began the era of the modern research university (Brubacher and Rudy 1976; Hunt 1992). Now politics is (or can be) a noble calling. But if universities are just one more political institution, why should citizens pay taxes to support an institution that may espouse political views they do not support?

Second, if the internal gyroscopes of both universities in general and academic researchers in particular are set (or re-set) for political purposes instead of objectivity and truth, trust is undermined. Why should marketing academia have authority if marketing academics themselves claim that all academic authority is illegitimate? How could students, practitioners, policy makers, other academics, and the general public trust us if we claim that objective, trustworthy utterances are impossible, if not undesirable? Consider, as a potential example, Brownlie and Saren's claim that marketing knowledge has been "commodified".

Commodification

It is one thing to acknowledge that marketing's knowledge claims are products to be marketed; it is quite another for Brownlie and Saren to assert that they are commodities "like any other". Although non-marketers may equate the word "product" with "commodity", our discipline uses the term "commodity" to denote homogeneous supply. That is, the output of one producer is virtually indistinguishable from any other. Automobiles and computers are not commodities, gold and "No. 2 hard KC" wheat are. Although all commodities are marketed, purchasing decisions are based on price alone. Thus, we have commodity exchanges for gold, but not automobiles.

Are marketing knowledge claims commodities? Are all claims within a general area in marketing (e.g. pricing) homogeneous, i.e. equally good, equally bad, equally true, equally false, equally right, equally wrong? If so, why should students, practitioners, policy makers, and the general public listen to marketing academics rather than to a competitor who may charge a lower price? Does not the claim that marketing knowledge is a commodity, if it is believed by our stakeholders, contribute to our discipline's delegitimization? Does it not self-destruct? Whatever may be the difficulties facing marketing (and we believe there are many), the commodification claim contributes to marketing's problems, not to the solution of marketing's problems.
Marketing Knowledge

If the commodification claim is self-destructive for marketing academe, what does the marketing of marketing knowledge imply, either for those who worry about the erosion of authority or for those who may be concerned about our disciplinary health for other reasons? The implications for marketing academe, we suggest, are the same as for other marketers. We should redirect our efforts toward producing knowledge claims that have value for one or more of our stakeholder groups, i.e. we must have quality products that are worth packaging, distributing and promoting. Marketing is more than just promotion. Good marketing starts with a good product. Non-marketers often seem to believe that sophisticated promotional programmes can sell anything. We know better — or we should. On the subject of having a product worth marketing, the suggestions of Michael Baker (this issue) are helpful.

Baker chastises marketing scholarship on the grounds that “earlier path breaking and insightful contributions tend to be overlooked or ignored”. Therefore, for him, “much of what passes for original work is a weak replication of seminal contributions published 30 or 40 years ago” and “by ignoring the past we will be frequently guilty of re-invention”. We agree. An example of egregiously ignoring the past, we suggest, has been marketing’s treatment of the work of Wroe Alderson (1957, 1965).

Alderson recognized that the authority and influence of neoclassical economics resulted from its having a theory of competition that not only was plausible and highly formalized in the manner of Newtonian mechanics, but had implications for the management of firms, the welfare of society, and public policy. (In the language of this essay, neoclassists maintain that perfect competition is a quality product and they have successfully marketed it.) Alderson also recognized many of the deficiencies of neoclassical theory and made significant strides toward developing a rival theory of competition, which he called “competition for differential advantage”. Yet his work lay fallow for three decades. During that time, as Day (1992) has pointed out, marketing focused on ever more narrow issues in marketing management. In the meantime, organization economists and strategic management scholars have been busy “re-inventing”, without attribution, Alderson’s works (Priem 1992). We hasten to add, however, that we place no blame on organization economists and strategic management scholars. Why expect organization economists and management scholars to recognize Alderson’s contributions when we have not? It is marketing that failed to carry on Alderson’s work; it is we who abandoned the search for a central theory for our discipline that would have managerial, societal and public policy implications; it is we who have focused on narrow issues; and it is we who have the opportunity, if not the obligation to resurrect Alderson’s insights.

Recently, the comparative advantage theory of competition has been offered as an extension of Alderson’s work and as a product worth our marketing efforts (Hunt and Morgan 1995). This theory, it is alleged, can explain the diversity of firms in market-based economics. It also can explain why market-based economies, compared with command economies, are more innovative, are more productive and have higher quality goods and services. Moreover, it is alleged that its rival, “perfect” competition, is an undesirable state that results from the absence of
innovation. Indeed, according to the comparative advantage theory of competition, "perfect competition" is a market imperfection.

Perhaps there are better candidates than the comparative advantage theory for serving as a central theory to guide marketing scholarship. Perhaps the theory is mis-specified. Perhaps it is false or misguided. Indeed, it may be fundamentally wrong-headed. All these things remain to be known. What we do know right now, however, is that it is far removed from the "esoteric irrelevancies" decried by Baker, for it addresses issues that are cognitively, managerially, and societally important. Will marketing allow it also to lie fallow for 30 years, only to be "re-invented" elsewhere? Though marketing need not do so, our discipline's 30-year abandonment of Alderson's project is a cautionary tale for those advocating unbridled optimism.

References
