UNBOUNDED COLLABORATION:
A WAY TO BROADEN AND IMPROVE MARKETING THEORY

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ABSTRACT

The author proposes that unbounded collaboration (hereafter UC), defined as the pursuit of scholarly research with one or more experts who have extensive scholarly training in one or more disparate disciplines, is an excellent process for broadening and improving marketing theory. In this paper, the author addresses three questions: (1) How does one begin UCs? (2) What are the threats to successful UCs? (3) How can we encourage more and better UCs? The author also provides brief descriptions of several successful UCs.

INTRODUCTION

As marketing scholars, we face a dilemma. Today's rigorous marketing scholarship demands ever-increasing knowledge about many disparate disciplines; so, we should keep abreast of non-business theories. Yet, the rapid growth of scientific knowledge and the burden of satisfying the publication requirements of our universities make such thorough scholarship too time-consuming; so, we are pressured to limit our knowledge about non-business theories.

In response to this dilemma, often we become "quick and dirty" scholars of non-business disciplines; i.e., we read several books and articles, we talk to a few experts, and then we conduct our research and write our manuscript. Often we become second-rate anthropologists, philosophers, sociologists, et cetera; as a result, the quality of our scholarship suffers.

How can we remain first-rate marketing scholars? The author's purpose is to answer this question by arguing for a different research process: the unbounded collaboration (hereafter UC). Specifically, the author will:

(1) define the term unbounded collaboration (UC);
(2) specify the goals of UCs;
(3) describe how to begin UCs;
(4) explain the threats to successful UCs;
(5) suggest why we tend to reject the results of UCs;
(6) briefly describe four successful UCs; and
(7) suggest how we can encourage more and better UCs.

WHAT IS UNBOUNDED COLLABORATION?

An unbounded collaboration (UC) is defined as the pursuit of scholarly research with one or more experts who have extensive scholarly training in one or more disparate disciplines. For marketing, the non-business disciplines are the disparate disciplines.

As formally defined, UCs do not require multiple persons; multidiscipline-trained, terminally-qualified marketing scholars could conduct UCs autonomously. However, the purpose of UCs is to apply non-business expertise and non-business perspectives to marketing problems. Because a marketing scholar is likely to look at marketing problems from a marketing perspective and to use marketing tools to solve marketing problems, autonomous UCs are likely to violate the spirit of such research efforts.

WHAT ARE THE GOALS OF UCs?

We should have two goals when conducting UCs: (1) to broaden and improve marketing theory, and (2) to enhance our skill and our pleasure in doing scholarly research.

We can broaden marketing theory through UCs by broadening and buttressing the foundations of marketing; UCs facilitate our access to the additional knowledge we need to develop new and better marketing theories. We can improve existing marketing theory through UCs by looking at marketing problems from different perspectives and by improving the way we borrow theories from other disciplines.

Theories come with the "intellectual baggage" of their mother discipline. Without an awareness of this baggage, we are likely to misapply these theories to marketing. Thus, through their awareness of this baggage, non-business collaborators (hereafter NBCs) can keep us from misapplying their discipline's theories.

We can enhance our skill and our pleasure in doing scholarly research through UCs. UC is a way to augment our own knowledge, and as such, is its own reward. Furthermore, UC is a way to "take an intellectual chance" (i.e., UC is a challenging approach to scholarly research).

HOW DOES ONE BEGIN UCs?

Preliminary Steps

Your first step is to find an appropriate NBC. You should consider interpersonal chemistry and subject-matter expertise in choosing your NBC, because both will determine the quality of your research. In addition, your NBC should be curious, patient, a good listener, and well-read in his or her discipline. Most importantly, your NBC should be someone who believes that ideas are important.

Your second step is to begin a dialogue in which you introduce your prospective NBC to the basics of marketing and the major problems now faced by marketing scholars and practitioners, and the prospective NBC introduces you to the basics of his or her discipline. Your dialogue should be unstructured (i.e., not problem-specific) because you cannot know, a priori, how a given NBC can best contribute to the body of marketing thought.

If your dialogue suggests that your prospective NBC can contribute to the body of marketing thought, your next step is to select an inaugural research project. Should you select a project on a par with the mapping of human DNA? No! Because your NBC and you will have very dissimilar perspectives, you will need a period of discovery. Too complex a project will unfit your UC before it has flowered. Thus, the best project for this period of discovery is a trial effort, such as a short, yet meaningful, publishable manuscript. One possibility is to write a brief comment about a recently published work. Through such a project
you can explore your NBC's thinking and expose your NBC to marketing thought. However, you should always be alert to ideas that could lead to a stream of research.

Production

Your NBC and you should work in the same room and do things jointly. Though seemingly an inefficient way to proceed, increasing your exposure to your NBC increases the likelihood that you will acquire new perspectives about research in general and marketing theory in particular. Furthermore, doing everything together is a way for each of you to acquire skills thought unremarkable by the other. In fact, one way to maintain enthusiasm for the UC is to find skills that each of you wants to develop.

WHAT ARE THE THREATS TO SUCCESSFUL UCs?

Problems with Producing a Marketable Work

The first problem relates to your NBC's greatest contribution: his or her ability to apply non-business thought to marketing problems. How do you judge the importance and quality of non-business thought? Because each discipline has its own theoretical, empirical, and philosophical wisdom, ideas that are unfamiliar to you will be very important to your NBC.

There is no simple solution to this problem. Other than selecting your NBC wisely, you are limited to careful questioning, intuition, and trust.

The second problem concerns the unorthodox results of UCs. Because you are exploring virgin intellectual territory, each new idea you have is likely to foster a dozen, more novel ideas. However, your innovative ideas can become so unconventional that other marketing scholars will reject them.

Because you cannot broaden and improve marketing theory if your ideas are rejected, you must never forget that marketing scholars are your targeted audience. Your new insights may be fascinating, but they will languish unknown if your general work is unacceptable to most marketing scholars. Thus, you must solicit frequent, informal feedback about your ideas and your manuscripts, especially from other marketing scholars.

Mechanics of Producing the First Draft

Inevitably, your NBC and you will disagree about the substance and format of your first draft. Major conflicts about the substance of your first draft can be caused by inconsistencies in your argument styles and differences in your beliefs about an acceptable rate of progress. Major conflicts about the format of your first draft can be caused by inconsistencies in the presentation norms of your respective disciplines.

Inconsistencies in your argument styles will cause disagreements about what is acceptable evidence. For example, in some disciplines a qualitative argument is more persuasive and argument by authority is unacceptable; in other disciplines a quantitative argument is more persuasive and argument by authority is acceptable.

When judgments about acceptable evidence differ, expectations about the pace or progress of research will differ. Because marketing is an inexact science, we have developed a high tolerance for ambiguity. Those NBCs who have a lower tolerance will work diligently to reduce the ambiguity of your ideas. Thus, you may grow weary of your NBC's efforts to review exhaustively all related literature or to construct a carefully crafted, bulletproof argument. However, you must remain patient and supportive because the NBC's craftsmanship is one of the critical ingredients of a successful UC.

Format norms for manuscripts also will differ across disciplines. Different disciplines foster different writing and presentation styles; e.g., differences regarding precision with words, length of paragraphs and sections, use of headings and subheadings, and use of tables and graphs. At the risk of exacerbating your NBC's concerns about "playing second fiddle," you must take responsibility for the physical production of manuscripts because you are the co-author who knows about the format norms of marketing journals.

However, your greatest danger is in becoming so enamored with the UC-process that you never complete a first draft. The research process itself can become exhilarating when you explore new world-views. As you acquire new insights, you will discover more important research problems and ways to improve the quality of your scholarship. Although you will be tempted to modify your initially conceived study drastically, you must "stay the course;" otherwise, you will start several totally different drafts, but never complete one.

Mechanics of Producing Revisions

You will find that the insubstantial, yet extremely negative comments of some parochial marketing reviewers will dampen the enthusiasm of your NBC. Some marketing reviewers may respond emotionally to a UC-based manuscript because, unless conclusions threaten a cherished paradigm, although seemingly counterintuitive, such emotional responses should encourage your NBC and you about the importance of your manuscript to marketing.

Finally, your NBC and you may have different styles in communicating with reviewers. For example, authors and reviewers are less diplomatic toward one another in some disciplines (e.g., philosophy). At the risk of alienating your NBC, you must manage the revision process, and communicate with marketing editors and marketing reviewers in the manner to which they have grown accustomed.

WHY ARE WE PREPARED TO REJECT UCs?

Though most of us value borrowing from other disciplines, many of us also believe that:

(1) we borrow from all the appropriate disciplines now, and we have all the tools we need to borrow from these disciplines correctly;

(2) although NBCs may have unique skills, knowledge, and perspectives, yet these may be too esoteric to help us solve marketing problems; and

(3) by borrowing excessively from other disciplines, and thus blurring marketing's status as a distinct discipline, we threaten to replace our new image as scientists with our old image as unoriginal, non-scientific hucksters.

For UC to become a mainstream of scholarly research in marketing, we must change these parochial attitudes.

ARE THERE EXAMPLES OF SUCCESSFUL UCs?

The author has pursued four streams of research through UC. One example from each stream is briefly discussed below.

Foundational

There are two sorts of knowledge claims: claims justified within the context of their discipline and claims not so justified. Even the most complete and systematic compen-
llum of a science must contain some unjustified claims. To call a claim unjustified is not to deny it, nor even to cast doubt upon it. An unjustified claim is simply a claim with no explicitly stated justification.

The goal of foundations research in marketing is to evaluate and improve marketing theory through the exploration of marketing's unjustified claims. Through foundations research, marketers could deepen their insight into the conceptual underpinnings of marketing, and thereby better understand the place of science within marketing.

In "Two Issues for the Three Dichotomies" (1988), the authors (a marketer, a philosopher, and a historian) report the results of a foundational study of Hunt's (1976, 1978) Three Dichotomies Model. They show that most of the problems, issues, theories, and research assigned to the positive half of Hunt's dichotomy should be assigned to the normative half of Hunt's dichotomy. From this finding, the authors argue that marketing, as it now stands, is a normative science (like logic or statistics).

Methodological

An argument-centered work is a work in which the conclusion (consisting of one or more theses), stated predominately in a natural or non-formal language, seems to be drawn from evidence presented in the work. In such a work, the conclusion clearly "stands to reason" or "is intuitively obvious."

Unfortunately, the subjective impression of obviousness does not guarantee objective validity. "Obvious" conclusions, if subjected to thorough examination, can prove to be either false or inconsistent. Without a suitable, generally acceptable method of evaluating arguments, all debates about the conclusions of argument-centered works become "mere exchanges of opinion."

In "Evaluating and Improving Argument-Centered Works in Marketing" (1987), the authors (a philosopher and a marketer) argue that marketers lack a standard set of tools with which to evaluate argument-centered works. The authors first demonstrate several well-established logical and philosophical tools for evaluating and improving argument-centered works, and then recommend that the marketing community accept and use these tools.

Historical

In "Cultural Themes in Brazilian and U.S. Auto Ads: A Cross-Cultural Comparison" (forthcoming), the authors (a historian and two marketers) examine the print ads of Brazil and of the U.S. for evidence of cross-cultural differences in values. Because the authors find that three of the four ad themes they investigated (i.e., urban themes, rural themes, leisure themes, and work themes) appear with different frequency in the print ads of Brazil and of the U.S., they suggest that there are cross-cultural differences in values.

Importantly, some of their findings disaffirm the theories of many historians and sociologists. Because the application of historical and sociological theories may produce erroneous advertising decisions, the authors advise advertisers to research carefully each national market before using a standardized advertising theme.

Ethical

In "The Ethics of Psychoactive Ads" (1990), the authors (a marketer and a historian) find that many of today's ads work by arousing the viewer's emotions. Unfortunately, the careless use of such ads produces a bad side-effect: the psychoactive ad. A psychoactive ad is any emotion-arousing ad that can cause a meaningful, well-defined group of viewers to feel anxious, to feel hostile toward others, or to feel a loss of self-esteem. The authors argue that, because some ill-conceived psychoactive ads can cause harm, ethical issues must arise during their production. Furthermore, because current pretesting methods cannot identify the potentially psychoactive ads, the authors offer some tentative guidelines for reducing the number of viewers harmed by psychoactive ads.

How Can We Encourage More and Better UCs?

Help Non-Business Scholars Become Marketable

We can encourage non-business scholars to collaborate with us by making them "marketable." By helping to integrate non-business scholars into the "real world," we offer them better access to funding, better access to data, and an opportunity to "make a real contribution."

Marketing is the business discipline best suited as a conduit between the real world and the theoretical world. The other business disciplines are less suited for this function: finance, accounting, administrative science, and MIS are overly narrow; strategy remains ill-defined. Locate a Pool of Researchers with an Interest in UC

Often, we will find that locating suitable NBCs is difficult. By establishing an informal network of marketing scholars and non-business scholars interested in pursuing UCs, we can reduce the barriers to UC research; searching a network for NBCs is easier, and more efficient, than searching "from scratch." In addition, by working en masse with NBCs, we should be able to produce work that is more acceptable to other marketing scholars.

Increase Incentive for UCs

NBCs need and want us to embrace their scholarly research. Thus, to inspire NBCs to work on marketing problems, we must display more of the fruits of UCs by:

1) creating more interdisciplinary conferences or conference sessions;
2) creating more interdisciplinary journals; and
3) encouraging existing marketing journals to accept more UC-based manuscripts, perhaps organized in "special issues."

In addition, larger, research-focused marketing departments could institute joint academic appointments with non-business departments. Marketing departments often pay higher salaries than non-business departments, so non-business scholars have a financial incentive to join marketing departments.

Lend Marketing Skills, Knowledge, and Perspectives to Non-Business Scholars

As marketing scholars, we generally agree that marketing is a science. However, we need more than an agreement among ourselves for marketing to be recognized as a science; in addition, the scientific community at large must recognize marketing as a science.

How can we achieve this recognition? One way is to help NBCs apply marketing to non-business problems. Instead of borrowing non-business expertise from NBCs, we can lend them marketing expertise. For example, social scientists have conceived many theories that need additional empirical testing. We could improve our standing in the scientific community by lending marketing thought, marketing tools, and marketing data to those who wish to test those theories.
Change the Review Process

In his article entitled, "A Note on Sadomasochism in the Review Process: I Hate When That Happens" (1986), Holbrook bemoans the sadistic nature of journal reviewers. He posits that journal reviewers write sadistic reviews because they are lazy (e.g., review manuscripts quickly and carelessly), needlessly negative (e.g., criticize, but never praise manuscripts), and egotistical (e.g., reject a stream of research on personal whim, insist upon adding references to the reviewer's published work).

We identify readily with Holbrook's anguish. We have all had manuscripts rejected by seemingly arbitrary and capricious reviewers. We have all berated reviewers for providing non-substantive comments that are uninformative (e.g., a problem is asserted but not shown), are based on personal opinion (e.g., "I don't believe/like the conclusion"), or are caused by careless reading (e.g., an asserted problem is addressed in the manuscript). Unfortunately, we are so busy sympathizing with Holbrook that we overlook a greater problem: though he identifies the problem of non-substantive comments, yet he fails to recommend specific guidelines for improving the review process.

The solution is not "kinder and gentler" reviewers; rather, it is "tougher, more perceptive" reviewers. No NAC will think less of marketing reviewers whose recommendations, if followed, lead to improved scholarship. Good researchers will always embrace "challenging" reviewers and shun ill-informed, lazy, and arbitrary reviewers.

Journal editors must be certain that their reviewers will furnish every author with substantive comments; comments that show the weaknesses of proofs/lemmas/arguments, show errors in fact or logic, or show that reference works have been misrepresented. How can editors be certain? At a minimum, editors should provide their reviewers with a set of written guidelines for substantive commentary and several examples of outstanding reviews.

Finally, we should add more non-business scholars to the permanent and ad hoc review boards of marketing journals. Such reviewers will be more sensitive to the value added to marketing thought by UGs.

REFERENCES


