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Barriers to Marketing Becoming What It Might Be: Individual vs. Community Costs

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INTRODUCTION

Marketing is what Shelby Hunt suggests it is in his article "MARKETING IS . . . ." To argue otherwise would be to argue that marketing is not a university discipline that aspires to be a professional discipline.

Hunt suggests marketing, as a professional discipline, is responsible to students, to practice, to the academy, and to society (the ultimate client). Specifically, these responsibilities are:

(a) to provide students an education that will enable them to get on the socioeconomic ladder and prepare them for their roles as competent, responsible marketers and as citizens;
(b) to provide a continuing supply of competent, responsible entrants to the marketing profession and to provide new knowledge about both the micro and macro dimensions of marketing;
(c) to uphold the mission of the academy of retailing, warehousing, and producing knowledge, its contract with society of objective knowledge for academic freedom, and its core values of reason, evidence, openness, and civility; and
(d) to provide society with objective knowledge and technically competent, socially responsible, liberally educated graduates.

Hunt concludes his article with three sentences. "But, what will marketing be? What will marketing become? That is up to us, isn’t it?" As Professor Hunt suggests, it is indeed up to us!

The fact that it is up to us underlies the community nature of a discipline. "Us" is the collectivity of marketing educators. However, academic disciplines tend to consist of individuals working alone as compared to working together as groups or teams. More important, the individual effort (costs) and rewards for performance do not consider the community’s or discipline’s costs. And perhaps most important is the fact that when only individual rewards and costs are considered, individuals (who collectively are "us") perform at a level that is suboptimal for advancing the discipline and helping make it "what it might be."

My purpose in responding to Hunt’s thought-provoking article is to more carefully delineate the relationship and conflict between individual costs and community costs in the performance of the responsibilities of the marketing discipline. In doing so I will identify barriers to progress that may stand in the way of our discipline becoming "what it might be."

COSTS AND REWARDS—THE INDIVIDUAL

Individual marketing scholars confront the cost and reward curves shown in panel A of Figure 1. On the horizontal axis is the level of quality performance of responsibilities (for a given quantity level); on the vertical axis are costs and rewards. One could develop separate curves for teaching, research and service. If one performs at a low quality level, individual costs are low; but as one increases the level of quality, costs rise at an increasing rate. This is because it is increasingly difficult to achieve perfection or 100 percent quality. At the same time, if one plots individual rewards, one will see that very little if any rewards come from low quality performance. But as quality reaches a certain threshold, rewards rise quite dramatically. However, as quality continues to rise to very high levels, the level of rewards tends to level off quite dramatically. This is because the university cannot or will not pay significantly higher economic rewards for extremely high quality versus merely good quality. We also could allow the reward curve to include psychic rewards for performing high quality research, teaching, or service. If this were done, rewards would tend to level off once a certain acceptable quality level is reached. In fact,
FIGURE 1—PANEL A
Individual Costs and Rewards

low quality

high quality

P^*

P**

PANEL B
Community vs. Individual Costs
pursuing higher quality to the point of perfection may also result in psychic costs, such as job and family tension, accruing to the individual.

If scholars attempt to maximize their individual rewards over costs, they will deliver quality level P* in panel A of the figure, assume that these individual curves are composites of all individual curves of marketing educators.

COMMUNITY COSTS

One of the problems with panel A is that the costs to the community or discipline are ignored. In panel B of Figure 1 we illustrate the costs to the community of quality performance. Essentially the community costs are those that relate to defective products, where the "product" is the performance of our responsibilities. When we perform at a low quality level, the cost or effort to us, as individuals in the discipline, is low. On the other hand, the cost of this poor quality performance to the discipline is very high. It is important to note that the cost of poor quality performance is largely, but not exclusively, incurred by the community (society and discipline), not the individual. This is why many marketing scholars deliver poor quality performance (i.e., they are not accountable for societal costs or externalities).

What are the costs to the community of poor quality? Some of these costs include the cost of poorly or improperly educated students and poor public policy and management decisions that result from the dissemination of poor quality research, textbooks, and other materials that are purportedly "marketing knowledge." Another community cost is the excessive stimulation of useless research that results when one of our leading journals publishes a poor quality article. Once an article is published in a top journal, it has the potential to stimulate a further stream of research. The process continues to build until the topic is exhausted.

The preceding examples represent only some of the community costs resulting from poor quality. The central point that must be recognized is that when we, as a discipline, do not pursue and achieve high quality performance, someone must "pay the price." On the other hand, if educators perform at a high quality level, the costs to them personally will be higher since doing so will take more time, more patience and the related psychological costs, and more effort to refine and improve the research, teaching, and services for which our discipline is responsible. At the same time, though, the costs to society and to the discipline (i.e., community) will be lowered.

The intersection of the individual cost curve and the community cost curve is the point of lowest total cost. This point will determine the overall quality at which we, as a discipline, perform our responsibilities. We will refer to this point as P**. The challenge that the marketing discipline faces is that the level at which the individual is compelled to perform (P*) is at a lower level than if the discipline were attempting to minimize its total cost (P**). This is because the individual does not primarily pay the cost of defective products (i.e., poorly educated students). This, in turn, creates the conflict that was referred to at the outset of this essay. Additionally, P*** shows "us" what we might be as a discipline. P* shows what is.

It should be pointed out that in constructing Figure 1, I intentionally showed the conflict between individual welfare and community welfare to be rather small. Indeed, rewards administered by universities for individuals pursuing high quality work may drop off much faster than recognized in panel A, and the community costs in panel B actually may be shifted up and to the right. If this were the case, then the conflict between individual and community welfare would be much more dramatic.

CAUSES OF THE CONFLICT

There are four fundamental reasons why the individual performs at a lower quality level than is optimal for the discipline. Each of these reasons is briefly reviewed.

Quantity vs. Quality Orientation

Many faculty are rewarded, with both economic and psychic rewards, for performing at a high quality rather than a high quality level. There appears to be a built-in bias in the evaluation system toward number of courses taught, number of articles published, and number of committee assignments. Norms develop for these types of outputs. Few attempts are made to measure quality. When quality is measured, surrogate indicators are typically used. For example, publishing in A-level journals is indicative of higher quality research than publishing in other outlets, and serving on editorial boards is indicative of higher quality service than serving on departmental committees.

Some of the signs of a quantity-driven discipline are the proliferation of journals and conferences. A careful reading of many of these journals and conference proceedings should be convincing evidence that a high quality of low quality work is finding its way into print. And most likely, marketing faculty are being rewarded for this quantity-driven behavior. But the problem we have as a discipline is that this type of performance is very costly in the long run, both to the discipline and society.

Another sign of our quantity obsession is the length of resumes. One could argue that longer and longer resumes indicate higher and higher levels of performance of our responsibilities. I believe it is often otherwise. We have all seen individuals out of a doctoral program for less than five years with dozens of publications to their credit. Is this high productivity? Is it possible to write two dozen high quality articles in five years? I often wonder what would happen if, when individuals were considered for tenure, they were evaluated on only three articles regardless of how many they had published. My prediction is that the quality of performance of research in the marketing discipline would rise dramatically.

Perhaps the single most differentiating factor between the best business schools and the weaker schools is that the best schools have developed norms for quality versus quantity. As a consequence, these schools individual behavior becomes more consistent with what is best for the discipline in performing its responsibilities. In brief, if our discipline
becomes more quality oriented, we will have a better chance at becoming what "we might be."

**Misallocation of Time**

How many hours did you spend last year reading original scholarly work? How often do you read in the cognate fields of marketing? Do you read the current marketing journals? Do you find large blocks of time to simply study and think and research within your mind? These are all potential investments in quality teaching, research, and professional service.

What is the constraint that is blocking you from investing more time in quality reading and study? Most of you will identify time as the constraint. You simply don't have the time. The fact is that we all have the same time available; we merely decide to use it differently. If you feel you are overly constrained by time, the next time you say "yes" to a request for service, consulting, etc., write down how much time it will take. Also, list the things you will have to say "no" to in order to say "yes" to the request. All "yes" responses are actually "no" responses to other things. One of the biggest barriers to developing our best resource (our minds) is how we misallocate time. All of us are very busy, but are we busy at the "right" things to allow the discipline to perform its responsibilities at a high quality level? If we are busy at the "wrong" things, we are preventing the discipline from becoming "what it might be."

One of our problems with time allocation is that many in the discipline are all too aware of the bias towards rewarding quantity (vs. quality) of output. Consequently, we allocate time to the things we can get accomplished the quickest. We have a very short-run view of performance and want to see results immediately. If we work on a research project, we want a published article that will be forthcoming in one-two years versus the three-five years or longer it may take to complete a high quality research endeavor.

**Obsession with Extrinsic Rewards**

As you think about the forthcoming academic year and plan your activities, do you find yourself worrying about your university or college reward system and how to allocate your efforts to increase your rewards? If we are truthful about this we will find that too many of us in the discipline are concerned with outcomes that are financially rewarded.

Quality performance is achieved by having a process focus, not an outcome focus. If we are dedicated to the process of research, teaching, and service, higher quality performance will be more easily achieved than if we are obsessed with outputs, financial rewards, and being able to list things on our resumes. When faculty members run down hallways shouting they have had a hit in a major publication, this underscores their outcome orientation. Why are they excited? Because they know that they will be recognized and rewarded (probably financially) for this output. That reward system is a major cultural constraint that will prevent us from performing our responsibilities at a high quality level.

Scholars should pursue objective knowledge, academic freedom and its core values of reason, evidence, openness, and civility. These are process-oriented activities that require intrinsic motivation. No one at your university is going to give you a large salary adjustment for pursuing core values. Instead, you will be rewarded for your output. Consequently, too many individuals value these extrinsic rewards so heavily that they begin to perform like rats in a maze. The end becomes more important than the means. In fact, the major reason that a large number of faculty members do not perform high quality scholarship after receiving tenure is that the university cannot provide sufficient financial rewards for this effort. This is becoming increasingly the case in the lean economic times for higher education in the 1990s. And since faculty are not intrinsically motivated and/or because they have financial obligations, they allocate their efforts to consulting or other activities that are more financially rewarding. Competition to receive tenure was an extrinsic motivator that "forced" them to do relatively high quality work. After they receive tenure, they no longer have the motivation to perform since they are not intrinsically motivated. Marketing educators that are too motivated by extrinsic rewards are preventing the discipline from becoming "what it might be."

**University vs. Disciplinary Goal Conflict**

A major cause of the individual performing at a lower quality level than is optimal for the discipline is that universities may have goals that are very different from the goals of the individual disciplines. This may be increasingly the case since funding for higher education in the 1990s is likely to be disappointing. Consequently, more and more universities will reward faculty for obtaining research and training dollars for the university. Faculty will be pressured to do more applied research and to develop training programs since these are the activities industry is most likely to fund. Hunt mentions that universities are in the business of manufacturing, warehousing, and retailing knowledge. There is considerable pressure on universities to do more retailing and low technology manufacturing (i.e., applied versus basic research). At the same time, universities are doing less warehousing because of, for example, the skyrocketing costs of journal subscriptions. The result is that there is an increasing conflict between what is best for the academic disciplines (including marketing) and what universities are establishing as goals. This will increasingly become a barrier to marketing becoming "what it might be."

**CONCLUSIONS**

Marketing can be "what it might be" if we all perform at a high quality level the responsibilities that Hunt develops for the discipline. As Hunt suggests, it is up to "us." To do this we must develop norms that favor quality over quantity of output. This, though, will only occur if we do a better job of allocating our time, become more deeply committed in our psychic makeup to intrinsic rewards, and work to remind
university and college administrators of the conflict between university goals that stress dollars of externally generated funds (via contract research and training) and the goals of the academic disciplines. The marketing discipline does indeed have upside potential if we can all become more community oriented. We can become "what we might be." It is up to us.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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