Agenda development for marketing research

The user’s voice

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The purpose of this paper is to articulate a research agenda for marketing, addressing the interests of the practitioner community, as well as academic researchers. That is, one that we believe the marketing research community is in a strong position to champion and influence. The agenda is developed from an innovative consultative initiative that brought together academics and marketing practitioners, including members of the Market Research Society (MRS), over an extensive period. Drawing on consultations with managers and professionals in marketing practice, we scoped out and developed an understanding of the challenges confronting contemporary marketing practitioners, presented in the paper as eight research themes. This paper highlights the challenges facing contemporary managers in marketing, and shows where research attention is needed, along with where future investigation would best serve the concerns of practice as well as theory. Additionally, it provides some reflections on the implications of our process and outcomes for research in marketing and of our chosen mode of user involvement for relationships between the worlds of academe and practice.

Introduction

In recent times, journals publishing across the management disciplines have devoted considerable attention to the relationship between academe and practice: the so-called rigour relevance debate, the double hurdles for management research (Pettigrew 1997), and the need for a closer working relationship between academics and practitioners (Mouncey 2009; Smith

To date, the debate has focused predominantly on the nature and extent of the ‘academic/practitioner divide’ (e.g. Starkey & Madan 2001; Weick 2001), developing methodologies to better disseminate the results of scientific study into practice (e.g. Tranfield *et al.* 2003), as well as rationalising, justifying and maintaining the divide in terms of distinctive modes of knowledge production and knowledge usage (e.g. Grey 2001). A further stream of debate has focused on how to make management research more relevant (e.g. Baldridge *et al.* 2004; Katsikeas *et al.* 2004; Guest 2007; Vermeulen 2007). These studies have principally focused on the relationship between academics and managers. More recently, in the *IJMR*, Mouncey (2009) discussed the need for academics and practitioners to collaborate and forge closer links if a comprehensive body of knowledge is to be built.

Baines *et al.* (2009) have extended the domain of relevance by suggesting an alternative to the academe/industry link, positing that where academic research in marketing is funded through taxation or by charitable donation, then it should address issues primarily of concern to less privileged groups within society. From the policy perspective, it would appear that the public-sector funders of research, at least in the UK, are keen that the business and management research they fund should, first of all, have an improving impact on business and management practice, with subsequent benefits cascading through society more widely.

Policy statements and activities support this view. For example, one conclusion from the Lambert Review (Lambert 2003) was that increased collaboration between business and university research departments would bring significant economic benefits to the UK. Furthermore, the UK’s Advanced Institute of Management Research was established to, among other things, conduct research that will identify actions to enhance the UK’s international competitiveness (Wensley 2006). Consequently, one issue that is important to policy makers and sponsors of research is that research should be relevant for practice. While it is understood that competing incentives exist, namely the desire to be relevant versus
an academic career structure that promotes publication in high-quality journals, there is no need for the two to be mutually exclusive.

Within this context, we describe the process and outcomes of an innovative consultative initiative, which brought together academics and marketing practitioners, including members of the Market Research Society (MRS), over an extensive period to scope out and develop an understanding of the challenges confronting managers in the UK in 2007–2008. This focus reflects a growing concern, articulated in a recent *IJMR* Viewpoint (Smith 2009), among researchers and promoters of research to forge better understanding and closer relationships with practising managers.

This paper explores and presents insights into the challenges confronting contemporary marketing practice, and reflects on the implications of these emergent priorities for management research and the market research industry. It is arranged as follows. First, to provide the context for our work, we review the recent literature on the academic/practice divide, with particular focus on research relevance. Next, we describe the process of the Business Engagement Forum (BEF) for Marketing Practice. Subsequently, we discuss the management priorities that emerged from the BEF and reflect on these in the context of other marketing-orientated research agendas that we have identified. Finally, we present our conclusions, discussing the implications of the emergent research agenda for marketing research and practice, and also of this particular mode of user involvement for relationships between the worlds of academe and practice.

**Addressing the relevance gap**

In addition to managers reportedly regarding much of the output in top academic journals as ‘unreadable, banal and inconsequential’ (Anderson 1998, p. 325), it also seems to lack relevance (Smallman 2006). Smith (2009) disparagingly notes that academics and market researchers appear to live in a ‘semi-detached symbiosis’ with each other, and calls for greater collaboration between the two communities. Tranfield and Denyer (2004), among others, have argued that producing knowledge in the context of application, in a form and manner making results accessible and utilisable by practitioners, should constitute a new and critical mission for management research in the 21st century. Commensurate with this call has been the emergence of novel, close-to-the-user, collaborative and interventionist methodologies designed directly to address this challenge.
Addressing the accusation of lack of relevance, scholars have proposed a range of research strategies. Although they carry different labels – such as action research (Eden & Huxham 1996); engaged scholarship (van De Ven & Johnson 2006); collaborative research (Amabile et al. 2001); pragmatic research (Hodgkinson et al. 2001); Mode 2 research (Gibbons et al. 1994; Tranfield & Starkey 1998); and management research as a design science (van Aken 2005) – these strategies have certain features in common. In particular, they share a participative orientation, deliberately seeking to include stakeholders and so generate more penetrating and insightful knowledge about complex problems than when scholars work on problems in isolation. For example, action research is an approach to social research locating the researcher within a social system with intentions to change the system as well as generate knowledge about it (Lewin 1946; Susman & Evered 1978). Involving practitioners in issues that actually matter to them provides a richness of insight that may not be gained without their involvement (Eden & Huxham 1996).

The strategies range in the specificity of their proposal, but generally tend to focus on the following two areas. A research process-orientated focus involves increased collaboration between academics and practitioners. A problem-orientated focus concentrates on real-world managerial challenges, where ‘Our subjects can tell us what needs to be studied – where our theories and knowledge are inadequate’ (Lawrence 1992, p. 140).

The opportunities for managers to become actively involved in research programmes are surprisingly few – limited, perhaps, to universal calls to respond to written consultations, invitations from known academics to participate or from serendipitous encounters emerging from network relations. So, not only is it difficult for managers to influence the output of the academic knowledge creation process, but it is also difficult to become involved in setting the agenda or having proactive input.

Academic/practitioner collaboration appears to be more common in medical and healthcare research (e.g. Poulton 1994; Rice et al. 1994; Oliver 1995; Faulkner & Thomas 2002; Oliver et al. 2004) than in business and management studies. While user involvement can be contentious – users may be too intimately connected with the phenomenon of interest, resulting in a lack of objectivity, and may be regarded with frank scepticism or open hostility (Golden-Biddle et al. 2003; Rose 2003) – such collaborations can be advantageous. Benefits are commonly outlined in the innovation literature, and include more successful new product development processes, reduced cycle time and improved services.
(e.g. Alam 2002) but, more generally, collaborations enlarge the domain of enquiry (Susman & Evered 1978) as users come to research with a different perspective from academic researchers and are able to give an ‘insider’s view’ (Rose 2003).

Given that managers have frequently been exhorted by academics to integrate their customers more intimately into organisational processes – for example, as lead users in the innovation process (von Hippel 1986, 1989; Franke et al. 2006), in product and service development (Griffin & Hauser 1993; Lengnick-Hall 1996; Matthing et al. 2004; Roberts et al. 2005), in co-creating value (Vargo & Lusch 2004, 2006), and developing customer loyalty (Auh et al. 2007) – it is curious that the notion is less widely applied in our own field. In this context, the current study attempts to deliver a wider role for managers in the research process, one that moves away from their being only the ‘subject’ of research to one that encourages greater participation.

A second strategy for promoting increased relevance is the ‘problem focused’ approach. A clearly specified question is, undeniably, critically important to any scientific investigation. Research questions identify the focus of interest of a project and specify where the boundaries are set: they define the facets of an empirical domain the researcher wishes to explore, setting priorities and foci of attention and implicitly excluding a range of unstudied topics (Huberman & Miles 1994). In particular, research questions provide a framework for conducting the study, helping the researcher to organise the research, and giving it relevance, direction and coherence, thereby helping to keep the researcher focused during the course of the investigation (Onwuegbuzie & Leech 2006).

Research questions may originate from a number of possible sources, including: topics of personal interest, from the academic literature, from the professional literature, from classroom discussions, from hobbies and other outside interests, and, of course, from the life experience of the researcher (Morse 1994; McNabb 2002). Most commonly, though, research questions are presented and justified in terms of the previous academic literature rather than in the expressed concerns of practising managers.

Aram and Salipante’s (2003) process of inquiry builds on Dewey’s notion that real science (as opposed to mere intellectual exercise) is grounded in ‘actual situations’, and they argue for ‘bridging scholarship’ that begins with the problem and remains focused on the problem throughout the course of its execution. Baldrige et al. (2004) demonstrate a positive correlation between relevance and academic quality, and argue that
academics and practitioners both value research that is interesting – in the sense that it questions basic assumptions and beliefs – and justified – in the sense that its claims are well supported by evidence. From a research usage perspective, if our subjects tell us what it is that needs to be studied, then there is a greater likelihood that our findings may have a practical application. Apart from the promise of utility, the approach may also be commensurate with the forthcoming Research Excellence Framework, which commits to recognise and reward high-quality research that contributes to social, cultural, public policy and economic well-being.¹

To date, research agendas for marketing published in peer-reviewed journals seem largely to have been proposed from an academic perspective (e.g. Katsikeas et al. 2004). To outline a set of ‘hot topics’, they assembled, in conjunction with the UK Academy of Marketing, over 50 academics to brainstorm ‘important directions for research in the marketing field’ (p. 569). Nine research themes were identified (see Table 1), from which they distil two top priority areas for future research: e-marketing and customers’ increased knowledge and power. While they assert that these topics are under-researched, because of the methodology it is difficult to argue that they represent the needs of contemporary marketing practice.

Little effort has been applied to identifying and incorporating the perspectives of practising managers. Gopinath and Hoffman (1995) suggest three reasons for including the managerial perspective: first, for their first-hand experience of the phenomena of interest; second, managers have, in the past, made important contributions to theoretical and conceptual developments (e.g. in the development of portfolio planning models); finally, research that is at least ostensibly practice orientated (such as strategy research and marketing research) is ultimately validated

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<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Nine research themes identified in Katsikeas et al. 2004</th>
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<td>1.</td>
<td>Cross-border buyer–seller interactions</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>New business models and their impact on international marketing</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>Market fragmentation versus globalisation and supranational organisations</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>The place of marketing within modern business operations</td>
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<td>5.</td>
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<td>Realities of the marketing process</td>
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<td>9.</td>
<td>Function of marketing resources</td>
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¹ See http://www.esrc.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/about/CI/strategic_forum/index.aspx (November 2009).
in the context of organisational practice. The current study is explicitly collaborative and, through that process, begins to develop a practice-informed research agenda.

In the following sections, we describe the method and results of our efforts to derive a practice-informed research agenda.

**Method**

The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) is committed to increasing its engagement with the business community. This paper describes the process and outputs of one initiative intended to span the divide: the Business Engagement Project (BEP). As part of ESRC’s business engagement strategy, the BEP was designed to help ESRC to:

- better understand how business feels it can utilise the higher education resource in the country
- assess business demand from selected sectors
- better engage with the sector, and apply current knowledge and evidence
- identify new areas for investment.

To elicit the challenges faced by marketing practitioners, we devised the following consultation process.

First, to develop a preliminary list of challenges, a series of interviews was conducted with a range of stakeholders. A diverse selection of practitioners – including marketing managers, industry and practice associations and commentators – were selected to represent a range of perspectives on marketing practice, including: fmcg, high technology, telecoms, pharmaceuticals, direct marketing, business-to-business marketing, and consultancy. Interviews were semi-structured and designed to elicit managers’ perceptions of the key contemporary and future challenges in marketing practice that could usefully be addressed by academic research.

Concurrently, a review of the literature (academic and grey) was undertaken. By means of the review, we were able to triangulate against the findings from the interviews and also begin to establish a picture of the extent to which previous academic studies addressed the emergent challenges. An exhaustive review was not possible within the constraints of this project.

Subsequently, the challenges and literature review were written up in the form of a draft report in which the challenges were presented.
and the literature discussed. The report was circulated among sector representatives, who were also invited to a breakfast meeting to discuss and comment upon the initial findings. A total of 32 representatives from business, policy making, trade associations and academia came together to reflect upon the findings presented, and to explore further how the worlds of academia and business might engage to address these challenges and develop a continuing dialogue between the two communities.

At the breakfast meetings, delegates were assigned to cabaret-style tables to ensure a mix of views at each table. Following a short presentation of the major themes identified in the report, delegates were invited to discuss the themes at their tables, to validate, develop or challenge them where appropriate, or even to introduce new themes where gaps were identified. Discussions were facilitated by an academic or senior industry/policy-making representative. At each table also sat a scribe, whose role it was to capture the conversations at each table.

During the workshop, the themes identified in the draft scoping study were largely validated, however attendees were also able to offer additional insights, propose alternative perspectives and add nuances reflecting sectoral variations to common themes.

In the following section, we reflect on the emergent challenges.

**Challenges facing marketing practice**

Resulting from the stakeholder interviews and discussion groups, a framework was developed (see Figure 1) that provides a structure for the findings and synthesises the key marketing challenges. It can be seen from Figure 1 that, in the first phase of the data collection and analysis, the challenges were grouped into ‘enduring’ and ‘emerging’ themes, and the opportunities that these present to develop synchrony between practice and theory. Enduring themes or challenges are those that continue to persist despite past research effort devoted to them. The review of the literature that is reported in Roberts et al. (2008) highlights academic work that has been undertaken in each of these areas. Themes such as measuring the value of marketing performance, branding and NPD are topical and well-represented themes in marketing research. That these challenges endure, at least from managers’ perspectives, may be suggestive of a continuing failure of the results of academic research to effectively diffuse into the world of practice – that is, assuming the right (practitioner-orientated) questions have been asked in the first place.
At the same time a number of emerging themes represent new, exciting challenges and opportunities for marketing practice and research. These opportunities are often driven by advances in information and communications technology such as the convergence of the internet and mobile phone. The digital environment is opening up the opportunity for new forms of marketing communications, however little is known about the management of more interactive forms of communication and their effects on traditional forms of media. In addition, managers are facing the challenge of environmental problems, resource shortages and economic problems on a global scale, which arguably demand a volte-face of marketing practice and the research agenda.

It was felt that opportunities for research and the reconceptualisation of marketing practice would need to take into account how global and local economic landscapes have changed over the past ten years. It was deemed imperative that research should both inform our teachings and reflect what is happening in practice. In doing so, it should also reflect the diversity of the domains of marketing practice (B2B, B2C, professional services, not-for-profit, etc.), and the growing complexity that managers face in their daily routines. For instance, organisations are being tasked to
operate with more care for the environment, building social and ethical considerations into marketing practices, yet still make a profit. However, the greatest challenge and opportunity for marketing practice and research was that presented by the changes taking place in consumer and business markets. The ubiquitous nature of the World Wide Web has facilitated the emergence of the IT-enabled consumer. The internet opens up business transparency, and informs and empowers customers in their purchasing decisions. This issue was increasingly apparent as we moved into phase two of the research, where the research themes were debated and refined, and the most pressing were put forward as management priorities, warranting further academic research. These are depicted in phase two of Figure 1, and may be summarised as follows.

**Understanding IT-enabled consumers**

The need to detect and sense signals from the constantly changing marketplace and develop a better understanding of consumer/customer behaviour raise issues around the nature and use of market research. These include:

- the need to learn from other disciplines, e.g. utilising ethnographic and anthropological approaches to better understand both nascent and current consumer issues, and the cultural and social contexts
- learning how to manage and fuse data from multiple data sources, e.g. qualitative data with computer-generated data.

Traditionally market researchers have collected data ‘about’ people as opposed to ‘from’ people; from a marketing perspective, one impact of new technologies has been to permit the customer greater ‘voice’ – that is, to facilitate the flow of information from individuals to organisations. As the customer gains greater ‘voice’, the locus of control of the message moves from the organisation to the consumer.

This increased flow raises a series of questions relating to:

- identifying and managing the different forms of consumer voice
- eliciting the growing range of forms of in-bound information from customers and potential customers
- capturing and analysing the resulting data, and managing the two-way flow of information.
The importance of incorporating the ‘voice of the customer’ is well understood, but the ability to utilise insights and to translate these into new product and service propositions remains challenging. Therefore, important areas for research include: turning market insight into action. This leads us to the following challenge – that of how to co-create value with customers and consumers.

**Understanding the co-creation of value**

There is much academic and practitioner interest around the concept of the co-creation of value, however there is little in the way of guidelines or empirical research on how to manage the co-creation process. Learning how to collaborate with consumers and manage the co-creation process is a growing area of importance.

**Utilising interactive marketing channels**

The new knowledge-empowered consumer dramatically changes one of the previous roles of marketing, as a top-down supplier of communications to potential consumers. Increasingly, the first point of reference for consumers when going to market for non-routine/non-impulse items are easy-to-access (i.e. online) sources of trustworthy advice, which add value by helping consumers navigate to the best choice for me. Such behaviour potentially challenges the top-down model of communications as it bypasses the influencing power of traditional communication and distribution channels, and puts a premium on information that helps consumers make better decisions, as opposed to information that influences consumer decisions in favour of particular brands. One consequence of this is a clear need for greater:

- understanding of what has become known as the *pathway to purchase* or *journey-to-purchase* – journey-to-purchase thinking acknowledges the different routes by which consumers come to make a purchase, and demands better understanding of consumers’ different journeys
- consideration of the roles of top-down and bottom-up information sources in customers’ decision-making processes, whether or not these differ across different product categories and consumer segments, and why.
In terms of the traditional marketing communications process, the status quo is being challenged as consumers are no longer willing to be passive receivers of marketing communications. In particular, the rapid rise of brands such as YouTube and MySpace has demonstrated how consumer creativity and sense of fun is being harnessed in the form of user-generated content. Here the challenges become ones of:

- managing ‘active’ consumer participation and ‘user-generated’ content in the marketing communications mix
- understanding and utilising the potential of online and social networking environments such as Second Life.

**Developing consumer-centric metrics**

Current practice in marketing measurement, brand awareness, brand preference, brand equity, sales, market share, margin and ROI, were criticised as being *incorrigibly narcissistic*, too focused on the company and not enough on the consumer. On top of that, even these metrics fail adequately to demonstrate marketing’s contribution to organisational performance; demonstrating contribution is a persistent concern. In addressing the theme of marketing metrics, academics were encouraged to value both the boardroom and the customer. The traditional debate is centred on the effectiveness of the marketing function. However, metrics are needed that also:

- establish the uses and benefits current marketing programmes deliver for consumers and what costs they impose (e.g. useful versus useless information, time and attention well spent versus wasted), and whether or not these metrics impact on consumers’ response to the marketing initiatives in question (Rust *et al.* 2004)
- align marketing metrics to consumers’ information requirements, e.g. what marketing communications do consumers want to receive as opposed to how much the organisation wants to spend and align marketing metrics to customer satisfaction
- are appropriate for influencing the board – brand value, corporate reputation, contribution to strategy.

It should be pointed out, however, that academics have been working in the field of marketing metrics and, for instance, positive associations between customer satisfaction and shareholder value have been demonstrated
(Anderson et al. 2004). Perhaps this example serves to illustrate the disconnect that exists between practice and academia, and the need for better communications from the academic community.

**Shaping the CSR agenda**

Corporate social responsibility, ethical marketing, social marketing and environmental issues were vigorously discussed. The themes had particular resonance, particularly in light of the credit crunch (the role of marketing in helping make informed choices rather than the promotion of consumption) and concerns relating to climate change (changes in behaviour and consumption patterns). It was felt that there is an opportunity for both marketing practitioners and the academic community to shape the organisational agenda here. In order to do this there is a greater need to:

- understand the role of marketing and its contribution to the organisation’s wider CSR agenda
- define the role for marketing in contemporary social issues – for example, the economics of *enough*, reducing consumption or targeted towards disaffected sub-groups of the younger generation
- understand the similarities and differences between marketing and CSR metrics, and how to bridge the divide.

**Internal influence and market orientation**

It was stated that marketers and the marketing profession are still challenged by something of an identity crisis that exists both internally and externally. The multiple identities of marketers were mapped on to a continuum extending from *marketing as promotion* (the T-shirts and balloons syndrome) to being *the voice of the consumers within the organisation*; typically, one delegate noted, ‘When I say I am in marketing, I am asked “What do you sell?”’ Reportedly, the role and contribution of marketing have not been explained well within organisations, and the relatively narrow view that the capacity of marketing and its role is in persuading and influencing people to purchase does not adequately reflect its potential contribution to achieving organisational objectives.

One contribution academic research could make would be in providing evidence to support the place of marketing at the *top table*. For example, new technologies have facilitated the development of a greater range of creative and analytical capabilities:
• how can these be applied in marketing practice, and how can the benefits be communicated through the organisation, particularly to the senior board?

Another aspect of the internal influence of marketing is the concept of marketing orientation. Despite the plethora of academic research around this concept, there is still debate around what exactly constitutes a marketing orientation and how this varies across firms’ structural factors. In particular, delegates called for applicable guidelines on implementation, indicating the following research areas:

• developing a market orientation
• addressing organisational cultural issues and barriers to developing a marketing orientation
• quantifying the benefits of a market orientation.

Training and development

The issues of internal marketing, the perception of marketing and how to develop a market orientation were all related to the question of training and development for marketers. This resonated with the delegates at a number of levels. At the most basic level it was stated that, despite the presence of professional institutions such as the Chartered Institute of Marketing and the Market Research Society, there are still too many people operating without a basic understanding of the principles of marketing, perpetuating the myth that marketing equals promotions and sales. Other delegates reported their experience of marketers failing to have sufficient understanding of less functionally specific concepts, practices and wider business applications, such as balance sheets, P&L accounts, the functioning and role of HRM departments, and so on, thus curtailing their advancement within organisations. This, it was felt, represented a general failure in students’ inquisitiveness, and also a need for universities and trainers to revisit their curricula. If marketers are to take a place in the boardroom then their training and development needs to encapsulate a broader understanding of financial, organisational and HR issues. Academia can contribute to this agenda by:

• revisiting their curricula in collaboration with practitioners to ensure appropriateness for industry needs
• uncovering skill requirements for future marketers
developing an understanding of the management of intangible assets for marketers and non-marketers.

**Business model innovation**

A number of respondents felt the issue of the changing marketing environment to be so important that responses above and beyond those of the marketing profession are demanded. It was felt that many marketing models and management practices were developed during, and reflect, an industrial age model of value creation. As a result, a chasm has developed that separates individuals and organisations. This is marked by mistrust, frustration and adversarial consumption experiences, which present marketers with serious problems as they represent the consumer within organisations. As such, in order to become truly consumer-centric, changes are needed at the level of the business model, to which marketers should contribute (Zuboff & Maxmin 2002). The challenges become:

- to what extent do the premises and assumptions that underpin marketing models that are taught and passed on as received wisdom pertain in today’s operating environment?
- in the digital age, what is the new marketing mix (what is the contemporary relevance of concepts such as the 4Ps)?
- to understand how organisations can innovate at the level of the business model
- how can marketers contribute and influence the process of systems innovation?

Mitchell (2002) supports the notion of a need for a change in the business model and the approach that marketers adopt towards consumers. He suggests that in future the most dominant form of marketing and research should revolve around helping buyers to buy rather than helping sellers to sell, thus facilitating rather than influencing purchase. It is suggested that further research could explore:

- the multiple touchpoints at which providers and consumers can interact to innovate and build enduring relationships.
The relationship between business and academia

Reflecting on the dialogue that took place in phase 2 of the research, it seems apparent that there is a relatively widely held perception among practitioners that the worlds of business and academia are largely separate. If academics want their research to reach and influence marketing practitioners, it must be relevant, actionable, concise and accessible – however, a focus on scientific quality is less necessary. Practicality is the watchword for this audience, and academic notions of legitimacy or validity cut little ice. At least one of the invited academics discussed the reward structure of academia. Academics are not rewarded for doing applied research, so why would an academic do anything relevant for practice for which there are no rewards? Universities recognising and rewarding the value of both applied and pure research may be one way to start to bridge the divide. Also, funders of research were encouraged to consider the mechanisms by which research is commissioned and bids evaluated. For instance, can a portfolio approach be developed in which practical application is encouraged (over scientific rigour) in the application process?

In terms of research and its dissemination, speed of response was also deemed important. Knowledge transfer partnerships, for example, were cited as a useful door-in to facilitate changes in organisations’ business models, but are still criticised as being too bureaucratic. One possible response to slow product delivery would be to engage business representatives right at the start of the research process, helping to define the research question and have a set of staged deliverables rather than waiting for the academic cycle to run its course.

Finally, there is a need for the dissemination of management knowledge that engages practitioners. It needs to be succinct and able to stimulate their interest to enquire further. The academic marketing community’s obsession with modelling and statistics appears to be a barrier to engaging practitioners’ interest, and leaves academics in danger of talking to themselves.

Discussion

This paper outlines a series of questions that form an agenda for future research in marketing practice. The questions are derived from an innovative consultative initiative in which marketing practitioners were asked to detail specific contemporary challenges that academic collaboration might help them address. Previous efforts at agenda-setting
have tended to be quite insular in that they have been driven largely from the academic perspective. The most recent, of which we are aware, were the ambitious efforts of Katsikeas et al. (2004). The next logical step may be regular forums in which academics and practitioners share the same space to debate together.

Delegates at the Business Engagement Forum for Marketing practice pointed towards a perceived disconnect between academic research and business practice; that the former’s focus, responding to a journal publication-driven agenda, is too narrow and esoteric to deliver immediate and realisable value to the world of practice. One particular delegate noted, for instance, that national (UK) spend relating to field marketing and sales promotions activities is considerable, whereas these practices appear not to feature prominently in university curricula. Furthermore, Gummesson (2002, p. 348) argues that academic marketing researchers that are too fixated with ‘classical’ marketing theory fail to reflect on whether or not there are phenomena that are fundamental to marketing that researchers are ‘neglecting this very day’. The research agenda presented here attempts to bridge this gap and avoid such negligence. Consequently, it is important to establish whether or not similarities or differences exist between the different research agendas derived from the two communities.

Katsikeas et al. (2004) suggested two top priority areas for future research: e-marketing, and customers’ increased knowledge and power. The first concerns the use of the technology to achieve marketing objectives, and the internet specifically, while the latter pertains to the increased knowledge and power of customers. The evidence of the BEP confirms these as important areas but, reflecting our respondents’ conceptualisation, we find less divisibility in these themes than appears to be the case in Katsikeas et al.’s (2004) reporting. That is, while technological improvements influence changes in the nature of marketing practice, they have also helped create better-informed and empowered customers, and marketing practitioners are interested in these interrelationships. Nevertheless, we agree with Katsikeas et al.’s (2004) conclusion that future research work examining how IT is shaping consumer behaviour would be especially valuable.

There are further areas of consensus between the agendas. Notably, both communities highlight the nature, role and identity of marketing, both as an organisational and social phenomenon, as an important theme. From the organisational perspective, academics and practitioners argue that marketing is marginalised and under-appreciated in many business
settings, and that work developing marketing’s place within organisational settings, with a clear articulation of its value, would make an important contribution to both theory and practice. At a societal level, our agendas converge around the issue of sustainability – for example, the roles of marketing in helping consumers make informed choices rather than in the promotion of consumption. Also, how marketing can be better used to help with the challenge of reducing the carbon footprint.

Our agendas diverged principally in three areas. First, there was divergence in the importance of metrics for the practitioner community. Our practitioner respondents clearly felt that current metrics are inadequate, and fail to represent marketing’s real contribution to organisational and societal value. Second, there is divergence in the extent to which global factors are an important contemporary consideration, though perhaps this divergence is simply a reflection of the compositions of our respective informant constituencies. Finally, delegates to the BEF make an important contribution to academic practice by holding up a mirror that we may see ourselves as others see us.2

Some academic work may have been disparaged for being dated, however, according to Gummesson (2002, p. 347), ‘We need theory for guidance, but not for obedience: we should go back to the “classics” to get a perspective, but for application today most of the “classics” are in need of upgrading or replacement.’ There were also calls for extant research to be synthesised and presented in a concise and digestible format appropriate for a practitioner audience. Similarly, a clear demand was voiced for work that is immediate, relevant, practical and actionable, and there was also a call for work to address more fundamental questions relating to marketing practice: where is marketing going, and what will marketing be about in five years and ten years?

This paper argues for both academic rigour in the research process and relevance in terms of marketing management. The two do not need to be mutually exclusive, and working together can be beneficial in terms of generating new insights and knowledge. Gopinath and Hoffman (1995, p. 577) recommend that, to ensure relevance to practitioners’ needs, ‘there must be interaction between the researchers and practitioners to identify the latter’s needs and subsequently to communicate the research findings to practitioners’. So, what does this mean for management researchers? Does it mean an abandonment of the ‘ivory tower’? We agree with Tapp (2004) that there is a place for an applied and a pure

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2 After Robert Burns’ poem ‘To a louse’.
research culture to co-exist. However, if academic research is to support organisations as they face the challenges of dynamic and turbulent markets, then academics need to understand at first hand their issues. We envisage a new type of researcher, one who is able to get closer to the problems of knowledge users and converse in the language of business. However, this does not allow for the abandonment of academic rigour and reflection, though it may require the breaking down of academic silos and more interdisciplinary work. This would require a change in the way that academics are recruited and rewarded, which is outside the scope of this paper.

Our recent experience suggests that potential users of research output have ideas about what research to do, how it might be done and how results can be communicated. The benefits of including practitioner-users in the agenda-setting process include the opportunity to ground research in the experiences of practising managers who may, because of their experience, ask different questions from those derived from a review of the literature. Vermeulen (2007, p. 758) suggests that, before starting their next research project, researchers should ask themselves: ‘Would “executives” be eager to understand the relationship between these variables?’ Researchers whose agendas are informed by questions that emanate from the world of practice would surely have some assurance that executives at least have some interest in the question under discussion, as long as the process does not appear tokenistic.

While new challenges have been uncovered as a result of the BEP, reassuringly, as the sectoral reports illustrate, a number of these challenges have already been identified and addressed in the research literature. In particular, the literature that focuses on market research has identified the impact of technology on the industry (Malhotra & Peterson 2001), and the implications of the IT-enabled consumer (Baker & Mouncey 2003) and of client-driven change (Chadwick 2006). We have highlighted the need for changes in the training and development of marketers to encapsulate a broader understanding of management issues and for academia to revisit its curriculum. In parallel, the market research community is being challenged to reassess its core skill sets and to redefine the way that education and professional development are provided. According to Smith and Dexter (2001), the changes in the business environment mean that researchers will need to be more focused on providing faster information solutions, and on how those solutions are implemented.
Of interest are the calls for practitioners and academics to work more closely together, learn from each other (Smith 2009) and to publish joint research findings (Mouncey 2009). Certainly, participants in the BEP appear to value the contribution of academic research, and exhibited an appetite for its output. So, the academic community has been challenged to respond to industry’s needs by building closer links with potential users, working together to generate and investigate research questions, and develop effective mechanisms for the translation of research findings into accessible, digestible and applicable knowledge.

References


About the authors

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research agenda – and involving researchers from the Universities of Brighton, Cranfield, Nottingham and Surrey.

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