Comment by Frederick E. Webster, Jr.

To attempt to consider carefully the whole process of creating, communicating, and using knowledge in a field as complex and diverse as marketing is clearly a task that is unmanageable, even by a large committee of talented and insightful people. A key part of that task would have to be the careful consideration of the basic question: What is the nature of “knowledge” in marketing? Equally difficult would be the question of how and by whom such knowledge is used, especially if one were to develop criteria for judging the quality and effectiveness of that use. Not surprisingly, therefore, the AMA’s Task Force on the Development of Marketing Thought chose to ignore these questions in favor of concentrating on potentially more tractable issues relating to the development and dissemination of marketing knowledge. It is also significant that the focus on “marketing thought” was narrowed to “marketing knowledge.”

Even if one accepts this definition of the task, however, the report of the Task Force is disappointing. The Task Force, dominated as it is by marketing educators rather than practitioners, elected to address some rather parochial and self-serving issues, most notably research funding, doctoral education, the promotion-and-tenure review process within the university, the editorial review process of academic journals, the role of AMA publications and conferences, and how senior faculty members allocate their time. If one were to ask marketing managers and students to define a set of issues relating to knowledge in the field of marketing, chances are good that none of the Task Force’s concerns would be high on their lists.

Rigor Versus Relevance

Marketing, perhaps more than any of the other management functions, has had to struggle with a presumed conflict between rigor and relevance. The Task Force accepted this dichotomy as valid, with strong statements against consulting by academicians, executive-level teaching, and multiple academic and “real-world” roles for senior academicians. They did not consider the value to researchers and managers of interactions to discuss marketing issues of importance to both practice and research. If the viewpoints and biases of the Task Force were to win the tug-of-war between rigor and relevance, between marketing as science and marketing as practice, relevance would be
flat on its back. At the extreme, issues of concern to marketing managers, issues of marketing practice that could reasonably be expected to provide direction for rigorous marketing inquiry, would be displaced by a world that exists only in the imagination of the theoretically and methodologically well-trained academic researcher. What kind of “knowledge” in marketing is there that is not relevant for practice?

Concern for the Welfare of the Researcher, Not the Field

The withdrawal from the real world of marketing practice, where knowledge ultimately must face the test of use, where marketing problems are complex and ill-defined (“fuzzy”) and “knowledge” is contingent and tentative at best, was launched, perhaps unwittingly, by the Task Force’s decision not to consider issues relating to knowledge utilization. The result of this choice is an exclusive concern with the research and publication process rather than outcomes. Though no one can argue with the importance of ongoing, critical evaluation of doctoral education, the promotion-and-tenure review process, the management of the publication process, and professional conferences, that evaluation, if it is to be valid and useful, must use criteria other than the welfare of the participants.

The personal condition of the researcher seems to dominate the concern of the Task Force, not the condition of the field in terms of the quality and usefulness of the research output. Furthermore, many of the assertions about the population of academic researchers are unnecessarily critical and negative and appear to be opinions not supported by sound evidence. For example:

- “Marketing has not been able to attract the best qualified individuals into doctoral programs.” Who and where are those hypothetical “best qualified individuals” and what are the criteria that determine qualification?
- “The marketing discipline produces far too many bombs, burnouts, and bigamists.” Assuming for the moment that these pejorative terms are valid, where is the evidence that the promotion-and-tenure review process consistently produces bad results rather than ensuring the professional survival of the most competent and productive?
- “Collectively, we fail to approach our work with the kind of moral resolve that can sustain us through a lifetime of rejections, disappointments, and frustrations. We desperately need some kind of spiritual center...” Such a plaint implies personal judgments about career success and failure and moral imperatives that seem strangely out of place in an assessment of the state of marketing knowledge.

Are Experience and Wisdom Not Knowledge?

The report will strike some readers as unnecessarily and unfairly critical of the more senior cadre of marketing academicians. Perhaps this impression is the result of the questionable trichotomy set up at the beginning of the report that distinguishes researcher-, teacher-, and consultant academicians, clearly implying that scholars must choose among the three models. (There is also an implied rank ordering of the worth of various groups of students from doctoral candidates at the top through undergraduate and master’s students to executives at the bottom.) In truth, the more senior a person is in the field, the more likely it is that he or she has effectively combined all three roles in the search for personal contribution, effectiveness, and satisfaction, finding ways in which each role can enhance and support the others. Academicians who concentrate exclusively on only one role may be regarded as less effective colleagues by their peers. The best faculties undoubtedly combine senior scholars who put different emphasis on each of the three roles, but who have more than acceptable levels of performance in each. This ability to combine and integrate a variety of professional roles may, in fact, be the primary determinant of a successful career in an academic setting, from both the individual’s and the institution’s perspective.

In marketing especially, the blending of these roles seems critical to the development of “knowledge,” narrowly defined, and even more so if one thinks about the broader term “marketing thought.” Marketing is, after all, an applied discipline. The problems studied are defined by and reflect a changing environment. We borrow from many other disciplines and our research frequently contributes back to those disciplines, but the phenomena we study are real-world problems.

Synergies among research, teaching, and consulting apparently are ruled out in the Task Force’s view. One of the more troubling aspects of this report is the open disdain for experiences such as consulting and executive education that bring the researcher into contact with the business community. It is said, in the section “Bombs, Burnouts, and Bigamists” (the terms signal what is coming), that executive teaching “provides lucrative alternative uses for the time of the academic researchers, especially as they begin to reach the level of full professor (when their mature appearance and distinguished demeanor presumably appeal to the seasoned business veteran). However profitable, such teaching opportunities appear to exert little
beneficial effect on the research process." The most charitable view of this criticism is that it is based on a very narrow definition of "real" research and limited experience with successful, high-level executive teaching.

There is no evidence that the Task Force considered carefully the ways in which successful senior people are able to exploit their consulting and executive teaching for research purposes. At the minimum, criticisms of senior scholars should be based on more thorough data about their continued research and publication productivity, as well as their teaching effectiveness. "Burnout" and "bigamist" are terms clearly tinged with moral judgments about the ways in which senior academicians allocate their time. Without better support and more careful analysis, such judgments are, at best, premature about the value of changing the portfolio of one’s professional activities over the career life cycle. If it were possible to take an inventory of marketing knowledge as it exists today, there is a strong likelihood that the list of truly significant contributions would be dominated by the works of senior scholars, past and present, whose careers were distinguished by their involvements in the world of affairs as well as the world of research.

The section heading "The Allocation of Time and Effort by Leading Contributors May Be Insufficient" seems inherently contradictory. "Insufficient" compared to what, if they are "leading contributors"? This section of the report is critical of the professional leadership provided by established researchers, but does not consider the costs to junior researchers if they were to be more involved in such activities as serving on editorial boards, arranging conferences, and judging competitions. Similar issues are involved in mentoring and institution-building roles performed by senior faculty members. They are all part of the job description, calling for the same kinds of time and talent tradeoffs that characterize most aspects of an adult life.

At times, the Task Force seems schizophrenic, of two minds on the issues. For example, they briefly acknowledge at one point that "[m]any academicians also learn from contact with managers and with members of other marketing constituencies," but follow with statements that consulting by junior faculty members should be discouraged and with the criticisms, just reviewed, of executive teaching. In contrast, the Task Force recommends establishing publication outlets that allow dissemination of knowledge derived from consulting applications and they decry the fact (in the Task Force's view at least) that "users of marketing knowl-

edge do not have the means to communicate their knowledge needs to researchers, particularly academic researchers." This point is debatable as a question of fact, unless one has defined sound academic behavior as precluding interaction with business managers.

**Academician-Practitioner Interaction**

Inadequate consideration is given to the role of forums, formal and informal, in which academic researchers and business practitioners come together to discuss issues of common concern, including research per se. These forums include the executive classroom, professional association meetings (the Task Force's criticisms and suggestions about American Marketing Association conferences are strong and justified), and in-company research projects, sometimes in connection with consulting assignments, sometimes not.

The role of the Marketing Science Institute, now in its twenty-seventh year with the support of more than 40 major corporations, with its very active programs of research support, conferences, and publications, is acknowledged only in passing and downplayed at that: "An agency providing this type of support [funding for knowledge development in the field of marketing] is the Marketing Science Institute, but its member companies represent a small portion of the Fortune 500 and it is constrained in the size of its grants." Given that MSI's members include such corporate leaders as AT&T, DuPont, Eastman Kodak, Ford, GE, General Foods, General Motors, Hewlett Packard, IBM, PepsiCo, Procter & Gamble, and Sears Roebuck, the power of this academic interface with the business community certainly warrants serious consideration. It should be noted that one member of the Task Force, Paul Bloom, recently completed an excellent historical review of the Marketing Science Institute, not coincidentally entitled Knowledge Development in Marketing (Bloom 1987), examining the role of MSI in advancing marketing knowledge and practice by encouraging joint efforts between practitioners and academicians. Researchers reported consistently that the opportunity presented by MSI for interaction with managers and the related access to data and other forms of information, combined with the unique chance to present ideas, concepts, and research findings to a critical and interested management audience, was even more valuable than MSI's financial support.

**Business Versus Academia? Rigor Versus Relevance?**

For those marketing researchers who regularly function at the interface of the business community and the academic research world, the rigor and relevance dichotomy is not only false but counterproductive and
misleading. Good research in marketing, by definition, has both. Relevance requires concern for and interaction with marketing managers and the problems they face when they attempt to apply and integrate marketing "knowledge" provided to them by the academic researcher. Research quality suffers if the only concern is analytical rigor because marketing problems are so easily misspecified, leading to results that are neither valid nor credible. However, managers and other practitioners certainly do not come to the academic world of marketing thought looking only for relevance. Nothing is more useful to a professional marketing manager than a good theory that can help to bring order out of chaos, insights out of data, meaning out of patterns. Rigorous conceptual, theoretical, and empirical work offers unique perspectives on real problems, not simply a rehashing of the experience that managers already have. What managers need is abstraction, contrast, generalization, and objectivity, and the opportunity to be challenged to think broadly and creatively about familiar issues. Nothing should be more satisfying to an academician-researcher, teacher, or consultant than to have a manager exclaim, "I never thought about it that way before."

No senior scholar in the field of marketing combines better the roles of researcher, teacher, and consultant than Professor John D. C. Little of MIT. In a recent Conference on Sales Promotion sponsored by the Marketing Science Institute (held in Boston on April 21–22, 1988) and attended by more than 70 people from business and academia, Professor Little made some observations that seem particularly germane as a summary statement about the development of marketing thought. Though his comments pertain specifically to what has been learned in the area of sales promotion, they apply more generally to the field of marketing. Little began by noting that he was "not ready to write down marketing laws" but that the field was developing a much better understanding of the phenomena. He observed, "New knowledge uncovers new complexity; every answer creates new questions." Describing many research projects that he had worked on (and clearly many of them were consulting projects that would meet almost anyone's test of "good" research), he described the process as one of building models, seeing patterns emerge over time, and beginning to generalize about the phenomena. He claimed that such generalizations could become "law-like" over time, giving some ability to explain observed behavior and occasionally to make predictions. That is a nice statement of the kinship of rigor and relevance in developing marketing knowledge.

REFERENCE


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