

Broadening the Boundaries of Academic Publication – A Follow-up and Suggestion

Edward Forrest, University of Alaska Anchorage
Jamie Murphy and Larry Neale, The University of Western Australia

Abstract

Among the many challenges facing marketers today are two broad questions: how to best utilise technology to store and disseminate the growing base of knowledge, and how to bridge the research divide between academics and practitioners. The authors propose that ANZMAC take the lead offered from other fields such as medicine and engineering to create the ANZMAC Research Data Warehouse (ARDW). The ARDW would require authors of conference papers to contribute not only their results and conclusions, but importantly, their databases to the warehouse, thus allowing replication and validation of studies.

Marketing academics would also encourage practitioners to contribute to the ARDW, learn from the successes and failures of others, and better connect with the academic community. Working together, academics and practitioners could help transform abstract knowledge and industry experience into practical intelligence.

Introduction- The Problem

Among the papers presented at ANZMAC 2005 was Buchanan and Wan's "Broadening the Boundaries of Academic Publication Priorities: An Exploratory Study into the Sources of Information Used by Senior Management Practitioners for Decision-Making Purposes and Their Implication for Academic Publication Priorities." The researchers investigated what sources of information and knowledge senior executives use in making key decisions. Shockingly, but perhaps not surprisingly, Buchanan and Wan found that executives considered academic sources of information "almost totally useless (p. 39)" and recommended that academics serious about disseminating their research to practitioners should "think outside their usual mechanisms or vehicles of delivery (p. 43)."

Practitioners viewed academic texts, journals and conferences as unworthy of their time. Apart from anything academic seeming to have negative connotations, practitioners' lack of time – not the lack of perceived value – drives their dismissal of academic research. The problem is not what research is done, rather how little research is used (Buchanan and Wan, 2005). A cursory literature review of the schism between marketing academics and practitioners shows that this problem is not new, not unique and often irreconcilable.

The Problem- Not New

Hunt (2002) observed that throughout marketing's 100-plus year history, one of the most recurring themes has been a divide between marketing academics and practitioners. The "practitioners neither subscribe to nor read academic marketing journals." In turn, academics rarely consult practitioners for direction on research questions or for insight in interpreting their results (Rynes, McNatt and Bretz, 1999).

The Problem – Not Unique

A great divide in knowledge creation and transfer between practitioners and academics is in nearly all fields (Rynes, Bartunek and Daft, 2001).

The Problem – Irreconcilable?

For some, the relationship between professor and professional remains doomed so long as each dwells in separate worlds with disparate perspectives, purposes and goals such as the:

- (1) creation of theoretical versus pragmatic knowledge,
- (2) use of data-supported versus logic-driven information,
- (3) use of the scientific method versus case studies,
- (4) prestige of academic-oriented versus practitioner-oriented journals, and
- (5) pressure of academic tenure versus the need for organisational effectiveness (Bolton and Stolcis, 2003, p. 626).

And who is to blame?

- Academics for inadequately conveying their abstract knowledge into practice, and being so insular and incestuous?

Each August, we (academics) come to talk with each other; during the rest of the year we read each others' papers in our journals and write our own papers so that we may, in turn, have an audience the following August: an incestuous, closed loop (Hambrick, 1994, p. 13).

Or practitioners for not expending the effort to:

- stay abreast of relevant research and contribute their experience and ideas to the theoretical debate (Van de Ven and Johnson, 2004),
- conduct research outside of a narrowly defined commercial focus, and
- provide documentation to enable replication and improvement (Levesque, 2004).

One observer of this tenuous relationship proffered seven reasons why marketing practitioners should ignore marketing academic research, the most notable being that, they do not ask or pay academics to do the research (November, 2004). “Why then should they expect academics to produce something of value to them (p.41)?” Moreover, November suggested that practitioners steer clear of academics given academics’ penchant to “make false or misleading statements about causality (p.42)... mislead their readers (and themselves) into thinking that their results are more meaningful than they really are (p.44)” and in the end “largely only corroborate what practitioners already know (p. 45).”

Two Worlds – Too Little Time – Too Much Information

Perhaps academics and practitioners are simply victims of today’s circumstances. The business executive – like every other information age knowledge worker – suffers from a surfeit of sources, statistics, facts and accelerating parade of new technologies, paradigms and processes. Practitioners toil in a “time is money” world, where employers do not reward them for keeping up with the latest research in prestigious journals. Meanwhile, academics toil in a “publish or perish” world, garnering rewards “for publishing their ideas in scholarly journals and conferences, not for having them applied in practice (Moody, 2003, p. 32).”

Going from bad to worse

As research methods, techniques and technologies become more sophisticated, they correspondingly become increasingly difficult to comprehend. Arcane language, insider acronyms, and exotic statistical calculations deter most practitioners from utilising mainstream academic research. Paradoxically, this is becoming as much a problem for academics, as universities no longer have a monopoly on knowledge production – especially in high tech fields where most new knowledge originates from practitioners, not academics (Gibbons et al., 1994; Van de Ven and Johnson, 2004).

The Consequences

Perhaps the gap is good, particularly if one subscribes to November's (2004) thesis that academics should celebrate their insularity and drop any claims of practical utility. Practitioners should avoid ethereal or spurious research; researchers should avoid the temptation of tied grants and consulting fees to follow narrow parochial interests. After all, within the realm of business and marketing, the lack of application and use of academic research is not a matter of life and death so much as a matter of profit and loss.

Yet the academic and practitioner divide can become a matter of life and death within such fields as medicine, biology, genetics and related life sciences. Quickly validating and integrating academic research into professional practice can be critical. In the past, the lag between discovery and diffusion of an innovation could be considerable, up to 200 years with medical cures (Rynes, Bartunek and Daft, 2001). By the end of the 20th Century, the lag between a medical innovation and its adoption in routine practice averaged 8 – 13 years, depending on the specialty (Sackett et al., 1997). When useful medical research fails to find its way into practice in a timely fashion everyone loses: "Researchers do not get their ideas tested in practice... practitioners persist in using practices that are obsolete or proven not to work"...and patients face "unnecessary pain, risk and expense (Moody, 2003, p. 32)."

Toward Broadening the Boundaries of Academic Publications

Accordingly, a new discipline has emerged to facilitate academic-practitioner relationships and expedite research uptake – *Research Utilisation*. The most notable *Research Utilisation* is in the fields of medicine, health sciences, nursing and clinical practices. In particular, the practice of *evidence-based medicine* (EBM) has proven to be effective. A mechanism "to reduce the time lag between the development of new treatments and their use in everyday medical practice... by using information technology to supplement the limited capability of the human mind to store and recall information (Moody, 2003, pp 36, 41)," EBM is a four-step process:

- 1) A meta-analysis of research, beginning with an exhaustive search for and systematic review of published and unpublished studies addressing a particular medical issue.
- 2) Critically evaluating the studies to identify which contribute to decision making.
- 3) Pooling the results to yield a quantitative estimate of the effectiveness of the treatment(s). ...This reduces the problems of information overload and interpretation of findings faced by medical practitioners, and puts information in a convenient form for decision making in practice.

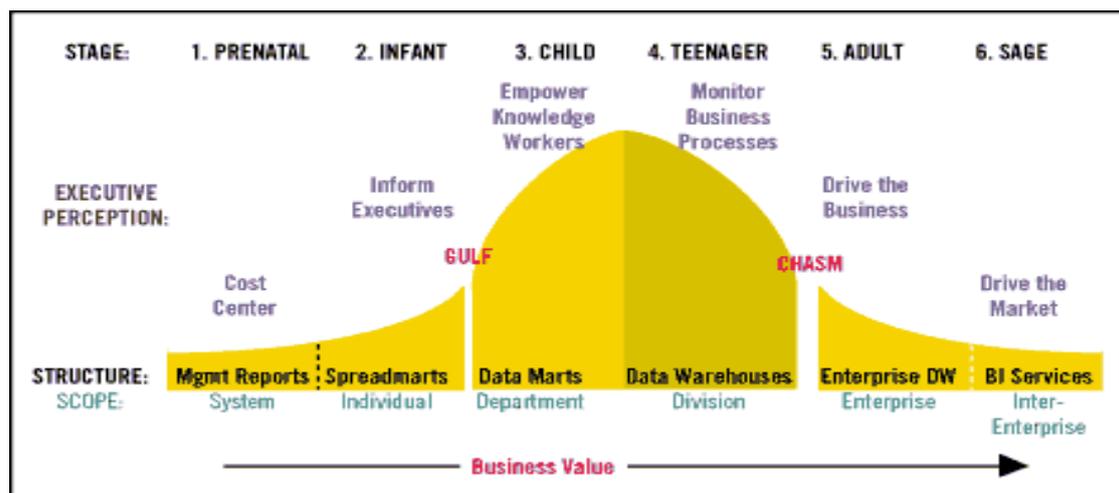
4) Disseminate the EBM reviews through selected online databases that provide high value knowledge via synthesised research findings such as the Cochrane Library, American College of Physicians, British Medical Association, Database of Abstracts of Reviews of Effectiveness, etc. (Moody, 2003, p. 32).

The logic of EBM has extended into the concept of Evidence-Based Practice in other disciplines such as Software Engineering and Information Sciences (Darroch and Toleman, 2005). Marketing should consider implementing an online database modeled on EBM.

The Ultimate Solution

Today, most academics house their own data and conduct their analyses on their desktop PC's. Figure 1 shows six stages of data warehousing, with academic data handling (alpha and numeric) resembling the infantile stage. These spreadmarts are spreadsheets or desktop databases that function as surrogate data marts but fail to align with other spreadmarts. Ubiquitous, cheap and easy to use, spreadmarts proliferate like weeds; organisations have from dozens to hundreds or thousands of these pernicious analytic structures (Eckerson, 2004, webpage-1).

Figure 1- Stages of Data Warehousing Maturity (Eckerson, 2004)



The ultimate and perhaps inevitable solution to the shortcomings of distributing marketing research requires that academics move beyond the infant-spreadmart stage and toward a single comprehensive and integrated document base with access to all relevant research on a topic – the Adult and Sage stages. The emerging technologies of relational database management systems (RDMS), business intelligence (BI), online analytical processing (OLAP), data-mining and knowledge management (KM) permit researchers to assemble and dissect seemingly limitless amounts of text and data (Cody et al., 2002). Perhaps Management Information System colleagues could formulate the ANZMAC Research Data Warehouse (ARDW) architecture.

With a functional ARDW and related data cubes, academic research – journal articles, textbooks, chapters, case studies, conference papers and presentations – that ANZMAC members generate are ripe for accumulation, integration and (re)analysis. A functioning ARDW helps solve the reliability problem pointed out by November (2004). Practitioners reading from the large, unreplicated bulk of marketing academic work should know “that

there is almost no chance that the work will be replicated, and until it is, the study is virtually meaningless and useless. Secondly, if it is replicated, there is about a 90% chance that the study will not be validated on the first independent test (p. 47).”

This poses another question: “Should submission to the ARDW be voluntary or compulsory for ANZMAC members?” Australian and British research indicates that voluntary deposits would yield approximately 15% of articles in the warehouse, whereas required submission along with support from authors builds the deposit rate to around 90% (Sale, 2006; Swan and Brown, 2005).

Bridging the Gap

To help bridge the gap between practitioners and academics, the ARDW must include industry results, and compare these results to academic analyses where possible. This industry perspective would help steer future academic marketing research, and give marketers some history for better decision making. The ARDW should be open to all who wish to contribute, and available to all who wish to browse its databases. Academics should encourage marketing practitioners to participate, and learn from the successes and failures of others.

Conclusion

The current system of distributing academic research shares only results and conclusions, not the data. In today’s information age, data may be industry’s most valuable asset and behind its push for centralised and synthesised data warehousing. The time has come to bridge the gap between industry and academics, perhaps via the device so sought and foreseen in 1945 by Vannevar Bush. As the Director of the Office of Scientific Research and Development, he attempted to coordinate the activities of some six thousand leading American scientists during WWII:

There may be millions of fine thoughts, and the account of the experience on which they are based, all encased within stone walls of acceptable architectural form; but if the scholar can get at only one a week by diligent search, his syntheses are not likely to keep up with the current scene. Consider a future device for individual use, which is a sort of mechanized private file and library. It needs a name, and, to coin one at random, "memex" will do. A memex is a device in which an individual stores all his books, records, and communications, and which is mechanized so that it may be consulted with exceeding speed and flexibility. It is an enlarged intimate supplement to his memory. (Bush, 1945, webpage-4)

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