



From academic research to marketing practice: Some further thoughts



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ABSTRACT

In this rejoinder, we share some further thoughts that were triggered by the insightful comments of Lehmann and Winer, and address some concerns expressed by them. We argue that our work can be interpreted using two different reference points, leading to an optimistic view or a more pessimistic one. We also advance a number of strategies for those in our field who aspire to influence the decisions that managers actually make.

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1. Introduction

We thank Don Lehmann (2014) and Russ Winer (2014) for their thoughtful comments on our paper (Roberts, Ujwal & Stefan, 2014). Their respective commentaries reveal a mix of optimistic and pessimistic tones about the impact of marketing science on marketing practice. We expand further on their comments by identifying (i) that about which we can be optimistic, (ii) that about which we should be worried, and (iii) how further research could address the study design issues raised by Lehmann and Winer.

2. Why is the glass half-full?

Both Lehmann and Winer comment on why we should be optimistic about the impact of marketing science on practice. There are three main reasons for optimism: the evidence in our study, evidence outside of our study, and the evolution of historical goals and accomplishments of research in marketing science.

2.1. Evidence in our study

As noted by Lehmann and Winer, our data show that academic research has had considerable influence on practice, and much of it is in areas which marketing managers see as representing important decisions for the firm (pricing management, customer market selection, new product management, and brand management) (Roberts et al., 2014). There is also reasonable alignment between what is impactful in academia and its influence on practice. In the words of Lehmann, this finding debunks the notion of academe as an ivory tower. As Lehmann

also confirms, internationalization of our discipline is progressing, which is encouraging considering trends in the globalization of business.

2.2. Evidence outside our study

We structured our thinking around the marketing science value chain, which is a relatively direct way of mapping the influence of marketing science articles on marketing tools, and on decision areas, as perceived by multiple stakeholders (academics, intermediaries and practicing managers). As Lehmann and Winer correctly point out, this approach possibly leads to an under-representation of the true impact of marketing scientists (and science) on marketing practice. Both allude to the importance of routes from marketing science ideas and methods to management practice other than via articles influencing tools and thence, directly or indirectly, the way in which marketers address their environment. While we noted the potential importance of this phenomenon in the paper, we were struck by the fact that both Lehmann and Winer specifically mentioned the role of face to face meetings. On reflection, we agree that this is an important aspect to the diffusion of marketing science innovations, and one where we as a profession could fruitfully consider how to improve its effectiveness.

2.3. Historical evolution of goals and accomplishments in marketing science

We appreciated the historical perspective that Winer provided in his commentary, outlining the evolution of marketing science as it emerged from its roots in the application of operations research methods to address the customer-facing activities of managers. This background, which pre-dates the beginning of our study period, provides a valuable complement to the analysis that we undertook. It also shows that the provenance of marketing science reveals reasons to be optimistic that we can extend our impact on practice. Many in

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our discipline are continuing to conduct research consistent with these roots, as reflected in the Lilien ISMS-MSI Practice Prize entries and finalists over the years. Furthermore, our discipline has an extensive presence of strong institutions at the interface of academia and business. Lehmann mentions the Marketing Science Institute and the Theory and Practice of Marketing Conference. The Institute for the Study of Business Markets at Penn State University has been sponsoring doctoral dissertations and research in business to business marketing, including many marketing science studies. The Wharton Customer Analytics Initiative and the Nielsen data jointly provided by the Kilts Center for Marketing at the University of Chicago and AC Nielsen are unique initiatives aimed at practice-relevant research. In the Netherlands, institutions such as AiMark at Tilburg University and the Center for Customer Insights at University of Groningen, among others, provide similar fora for practitioners, data providers, and academics to interact. Similar initiatives are common in other European countries as well.

3. Why is the glass half-empty?

Notwithstanding the reasons to be optimistic about our impact on practice, Lehmann and Winer both also identify reasons as to why we should be concerned. There are three main reasons to be pessimistic: a general decline in academic-practice collaboration in many areas, increasing competition from industry and other disciplines, and trends in doctoral training and publication processes.

3.1. Academic-practice collaboration

As Winer eloquently notes (and we point out in our paper), the participation of marketing practitioners in our research activities (e.g., conferences, editorial and advisory board memberships for publications) has dropped dramatically. This change raises the question of whether we academics are merely talking to each other, without necessarily concerning ourselves with feedback and input from those whose practices the discipline aims to impact. Moreover, our discipline overlooks that ideally it should also aspire to collaborate with practitioners beyond the marketing discipline. CFOs and chief controllers have a major impact on marketing spending (and interest in its effectiveness), but we know of few initiatives that seek to foster collaboration with this group of practitioners (the *Marketing Strategy Meets Wall Street* initiative probably being closest – see <http://www.marketing.uni-frankfurt.de/marketingmeetswallstreet/>). CEOs are increasingly customer oriented, which should make the CEO our research partner for big picture issues related to the customer. Our discipline is uniquely positioned to help CEOs identify and respond to customer demand in the most effective and efficient manner. But today's marketing science in most aspects has lost sight of the CEO, while it has seen the CMO largely disappear from the board room (Verhoef & Leeflang, 2009).

3.2. Competition from industry and other disciplines

Winer raises the interesting issue of competition from industry in developing relevant knowledge assets. He suggests that marketing academics are losing, or in many places have lost, the edge to more innovative research being conducted within a new breed of specialist commercial organizations such as Google. Winer quite correctly points out that private organizations have a strong interest in protecting rather than sharing intellectual property, and that may involve a loss of opportunity for us as academics to contribute towards further developing generalizable and publicly available knowledge. Recent changes adopted by our top academic journals encouraging authors to publicize their data and estimation code do not help, even if the changes are meant to achieve other laudable goals such as establishing the integrity of evidence and enabling replication. Such changes in our academic world further decrease the appropriable intellectual property marketing

scientists are able to establish, which may imply smaller rewards for academic innovation, and possibly reduced inflow or greater outflow of top talent.

Competition for developing impactful knowledge assets is increasingly also coming from other academic disciplines. For example, organization behavior researchers have contributed to services marketing; information technology and systems researchers are engaged in studies on targeting, data mining, and new media business models; and economists have researched consumer heuristics and biases. All of these areas are relevant to marketing practice, and as such, other disciplines are competing with marketing to develop knowledge that will impact practice. As a result, the discipline of marketing may risk losing the “ownership” of ideas within some areas, diminishing our overall impact on practice. Of course, from an overall business perspective this only presents a problem if we, as marketing scientists, have something unique to offer. In this respect, we do believe that our discipline has perspectives that enable us to add unique value to marketing practice. One of these is an empathy for and understanding of the “customer orientation” concept, which is useful in tracing long-term effects of marketing actions on firm value and consumer welfare. Another is an integrated view of the antecedents and consequences of marketing activities (what Day (1990) calls “customer sensing” and “customer relating” sources of competitive advantage), useful in ensuring seamlessness in the path from strategic vision to realization. Our discipline has specific competencies in customer segmentation, value creation, value identification, and value extraction, all of which are critical for marketing practice.

3.3. Trends within the discipline

Winer notes, as do others, that the training and background of newer academics in our discipline has changed over the years. In particular, the discipline has hired many PhDs in economics and psychology who do not necessarily know much about marketing institutions or marketing as it is practiced. Of even more concern, their peer group often remains the disciplines from which they came, taking our discipline further from its connections to practice, i.e., relevance. While there are many reasons for decreasing relevance, Lehmann sharply notes that part of the danger is self-inflicted. Our minds are increasingly trained to reject papers based on rigor, but we must pause to consider if we are causing collateral damage to our ability to have an impact on practice by focusing solely on rigor, often times even at the cost of relevance of the research to marketing practice. Rigor has become an almost exclusive focus recently, implying that reviewers care more about the perfection of an answer to the question, rather than the relevance of the question per se. However, practicing managers often deal with big questions that lend themselves to imperfect answers at best. As one goes higher up the hierarchy of the firm, questions become bigger and less structured, and analysis informing those questions less perfect. Thus, by pushing perfection over relevance, we run the risk of pushing the impact of our research on the firm down the hierarchy of the firm. Even worse, what we teach students (one route to practice impact) may become less relevant in terms of overall business impact, leading to the practice of marketing becoming even less influential in the firm than it is already. The issue of self-inflicted loss of relevance has already been recognized by way of thought pieces from leading scholars such as Reibstein, Day, and Wind (2009) and Lilien (2011). Any solution to this problem requires a renewed dual-focus on rigor and relevance of research. Rigor is valuable and important. Indeed, without a strong basis of rigor, research cannot be relevant in a reliable way. However, we must be concerned when marginal increases in rigor crowd out relevance in practical applications.

4. Limitations of our study design

Lehmann and Winer raise some fair points of criticism regarding our study's design. In fact, we feel their criticism is, in some senses, kind on

us in view of our own learnings from this project and the controversy we have aroused during this learning process. Lehmann and Winer point out that, in a study such as ours, there is a myriad of possible ways to approach it, and a host of different measures that one could use. We appreciate that other scholars might have made other, just as defensible, choices. Having noted this, we would like to identify two areas in which more work could be undertaken to great advantage:

- Larger sample for transition matrices. Lehmann suggests that it would have been useful for us to have had a larger sample when calibrating the transition matrices from articles to tools, articles to decisions, and tools to decisions, included as Web Appendix 2.1. We agree, but one thing that we would say in our defense is that our data do suggest that the prime source of variation in opinion is in terms of which articles and tools are important and on which decisions have they had influence. The question of which specific articles affected individual tools and decisions, and which specific tools affected individual decisions elicited considerably more consensus. The average inter-rater reliability for the transition matrices was 0.91 (as measured by Rust and Cooil's (1994) proportional reduction of loss measure). We do recognize though that a larger sample would imply dropping the focus on marketing science articles, which we were not willing to do in this study, but would be an interesting area for future study.
- Partial view of practice impact: As Lehmann states, there are more ways in which marketing scientists (and science) may influence practice beyond writing academic articles. Our study takes a partial view, via the marketing science value chain, of how marketing science might affect practice. In particular, executive education, MBA teaching, research centers at the intersection of practice and academia, consulting practices of marketing scientists, collaborative conferences between practice and academia, articles in journals outside the five we chose to examine, and books are other conduits by which practice may be impacted by marketing science. While we do not preclude these (and they are implicitly measured in terms of the impact marketing science has had on various marketing decisions), we do not calibrate them explicitly. We chose our study design to be able to calibrate the impact via one major route, but future research might creatively examine the impact by other routes. For example, a study might survey managers to directly ask what knowledge has most shaped their

practices, and then trace the antecedents of that knowledge further back to articles. We started with articles and traced their impact forward to decisions. A much more attractive (although also more difficult) approach would be to start with marketing decisions and map backwards the degree to which marketing science research has influenced the way in which those decisions are made.

5. Conclusions

We would like to close by once again thanking Lehmann and Winer for their comments on our research, and by reiterating our primary objectives with this research:

- We aimed to systematically gather, synthesize, and contrast the views of three major stakeholder groups regarding the impact of marketing science research on management practice,
- We wanted to draw some conclusions based on this data collection as to what has historically worked, what has not, and where the difference lies, and,
- We wished to identify not just past impact of marketing science, but also future likely impact, given the trends that we see in the environment.

We hope that our research provides a useful and thought-provoking step along that path.

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