

# Celebrating marketing's dirty word

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The title of Mark Houston's editorial intrigues me. I grew up in the era of George Carlin's "Seven Dirty Words" you can never say on television and know how words can inflame, agitate, and punish. At the same time, words can inspire, provoke, transform, and illuminate. My view is that *strategy* is not a dirty word at all. It is a word that reflects a part of the field that lies at a rich nexus of theory and practice that is very unique in marketing.

## The problem with labels

Mark's Figure 1 is interesting. There is a decrease in the number of scholars self-identifying with marketing strategy. However, I have questions about these data. First, how was the question posed by the DocSig? It appears that students were asked to align with consumer behavior, strategy, modeling-empirical, or modeling-analytical. The question is problematic because marketing strategy and consumer behavior scholars often use empirical models.

Second, and more importantly, two of the categories are about methods approaches (analytical modeling, empirical modeling) and two are about research areas (CB, strategy). The question separates areas that naturally overlap. This approach, which is replicated in the field and in our own departments, contributes to the problem. We need new labels or no labels. However, if this question is asked, candidates should be asked to check as many boxes as they think reflect who

they are. We would then have a much more accurate sense of how the field is changing. Related, I think these data would show that an increasing number of empirical and analytic modelers would self-identify as having a focus on marketing strategy problems. In that sense, marketing strategy faces the problem that marketing has faced for years, which is that now everyone is doing it. Marketing strategy may look as if it is disappearing, but it is, in fact, more deeply embedded in more schools and across more papers. Take an example: When marketing strategy scholars first started using Jim March's ideas about exploration and exploitation in the 1990s (March 1991), empirical modelers were not aware of these concepts. However, now these ideas have infiltrated the learning models used by this group. Take another example: Very few modelers used quasi- or natural experiments in their research until the last decade. However, this design approach has been a part of marketing strategy research for almost three decades. So, I would contend that marketing strategy research has won the war of influence, but perhaps lost the war of labels.

## The blooming flowers in marketing strategy

Strategy scholars focus on the firm and study firm investments, strategies, characteristics, and outcomes. What separates marketing strategy from strategy is that our focus is on the firm's exchanges with the marketplace. This rich theoretical domain brings with it many real-world problems that research can help resolve directly. Research may also develop critical theoretical insights that lead to new ways of thinking about the firm's problems and their resolution. Still other research may produce a payoff for policymakers engaged with firm marketing or for customers who interact with the firm. All have important implications. Jerry Zaltman, one of my advisors and mentors, always taught his students to think

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about the degree to which our ideas can change thoughts and behaviors. There are wonderful papers that start with the firm's problem and develop theory and results to resolve it. There are still other wonderful papers that begin with two contradicting theories whose resolution has important implications for the manager. Other papers work at the nexus of theory and practice to derive interesting ideas.

Given there are so many important ways to contribute, I doubt the value of using the label “managerial,” as Mark does, to describe this part of the field. I worry that we may push people out if we insist on that definition. Also, many empirical modeling papers are more managerial given the questions are very focused on a specific marketing mix problem and an optimization solution. I agree that getting to substantive implications is important for our field, but we can get there with so many different approaches that I would rather follow Kanter (1988) and “let a thousand flowers bloom” than to try to clarify the exact nature of the pathways to contribution.

### **Ratcheting method requirements and retreating idea generation skills**

Mark is right that method requirements have ratcheted up considerably over the last decade. These requirements are critical to determine validity of findings, and so it is important for students to learn these tools. However, I have a set of additional warnings on this topic.

First, do not conclude that meeting these new method requirements is a publication gateway. It is a necessary, but not sufficient, criterion for publication. Papers must make a contribution first and foremost. In my experience, the contribution is rarely, if ever, determined by methods considerations. Even if methods complaints are issued by reviewers, I argue that the overwhelming reason papers do not progress to publication is because the basic idea is not very important or interesting. If so, all of us should be investing just as much time in building our idea generation skills—skills that help us notice interesting problems in what we read, see, and hear in the marketplace. It is a serious error to build methods skills in lieu of idea generation skills. To that end, marketing departments should consider requiring all PhD students to take seminars across all of the main areas of the field. We do this at Duke, and I think our students are better prepared for the job market, are stronger idea generators because they have breadth, and are better colleagues now and when they become faculty members because they truly understand the entire field of marketing.

Second, I have observed a tendency to fail to develop theory when using proxy measures found in secondary data. This strips away a key part of a paper's contribution because the focus has now narrowed to a measure instead of a potentially broader theoretical construct. When you offer a theoretical construct and not just a measure, you add to the building

blocks of the field and improve its generative capacity. If an idea is conceptualized more broadly (and not trapped by a specific operational form), future scholars are more likely to engage with it. They may even operationalize the construct more effectively while moving the idea forward in the literature. By offering theoretical constructs, we advance ideas, not measures. Our ideas define us as a field, and so focusing on offering the strongest ideas (not measures) furthers the discipline.

Third, please do not give up on problems that require primary data. Many important organizational problems can only be addressed with survey data, which is why this tool has been a critical part of the field's development. Therefore, while steps need to be taken to address all of the concerns Mark mentioned, there is still a critical role for survey research. If causality remains an important critique, a small experiment could be run. The bigger idea uncovered in the survey might not be testable in an experiment; however, a critical focal part of the model could be examined to improve the validity of the findings.

Finally, reviewers also need to consider these points. Although I think most reviewers do have a strong bias toward the value of the idea, I sometimes see reviewers passing on good ideas because they do not like the execution. I think this is a mistake and encourage reviewers to offer authors a pathway to correct execution weaknesses. It is important to focus on what can and cannot be fixed. Reviewers should also be careful not to ask authors to throw out their theoretical constructs and simply focus on proxies. (It is a different problem if the theoretical construct is mislabeled.) The goal of scientific exploration is to make a contribution, and we do that first by advancing the quality of our ideas.

### **Driving toward new questions and new ideas**

If the field is to uncover the best new questions and ideas, I think we need to look for similarities, not for differences. This means not viewing colleagues and parts of the field as quant, CB, or managerial, but instead focusing on problems and areas such as health, learning, innovation, social media, or culture. These labels reflect important marketing questions and rich theory opportunities. The other labels are divisive and odd (see earlier discussion). If marketing is going to thrive as a field, seeking out these areas and reaching across to chat with and or work with scholars across the discipline is important. I always go back to Carpenter and Nakamoto's, 1989 O'Dell-winning paper on “Consumer Preference Formation and the Pioneering Advantage.” As their retrospective describes, Greg was John Farley's student and more marketing strategy focused, while Kent was Peter Wright's student and more consumer behavior focused (Carpenter and Nakamoto 1994). Together, they offered an award-winning consumer learning account of an important firm problem. We need more

collaboration like this! The key is a willingness to remain open to the valuable insights from colleagues working in different disciplinary traditions and different methods. When we look for similarities, we find ways to connect and make our ideas better.

Marketing as a field of practice is undergoing a bit of a renaissance given the emerging importance of digital marketing, technology marketing social media, and marketing analytics. Some of these areas of practice are what I call “new wine, old bottles,” meaning the same principles can be applied to think through these marketing areas. However, these areas are also rich with new research questions, new firm problems, and new theory building opportunities. I hope scholars will take this opportunity to revisit assumptions, break interdisciplinary boundaries, and offer big new ideas for the field. Reviewers must support such efforts. This is not a free pass, but rather an acknowledgement that the authors are pushing the field into new territory that may challenge existing views and norms. If we are to thrive as a field, we need to encourage such efforts and help make them as strong as possible. If not, we will become more incremental—what I call “remix

research” or “revival research.” Let us all work to dive into new territory that builds new lines of inquiry, that uncovers problems that firms and policymakers do not even know exist, and that makes firm exchanges with the marketplace stronger, more meaningful for consumers, better for society, and more profitable for firms.

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