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EDITORIAL

Introducing the *Theory* + *Practice* section

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Over the past thirty years, there has been increasing concern that academic research in marketing is losing its managerial relevance (Hunt 2017; Jaworski 2011; Reibstein et al. 2009). There are a wide variety of structural causes including how PhD students in marketing are trained, the increasing specialization of the field – into theory-based categories – rather than practice-based representations of research areas (e.g., a researcher labels herself as being interested in behavioral economics vs. channels of distribution), and the hiring strategies of top management schools that often favor discipline training and scholarship (e.g., economics, psychology) outside of marketing (Hunt 2017). These structural issues – as well as several others – certainly inhibit managerial relevance.

However, there is another significant constraint that is less noticed, and much less discussed, by scholars in the discipline. Namely, the ability, motivation, and opportunity of scholars to identify and discuss important problems with conceptually-oriented senior marketing practitioners and translate those conversations (eventually) into publishable manuscripts. Hence, even if a scholar could gain access to these thoughtful practitioners, the researcher still has to identify a preliminary topic, design the conversation protocol, spot nuggets of new insight during (or after) the conversation, and integrate this field effort into existing literature. So, it is a two-part problem – gaining access to senior practitioners with conceptual skills and crafting a research paper that will excite reviewers and be published in our best journals.

There is little wonder therefore, given *both* structural and access issues, that a decreasing number of scholars are focused on practice. While the structural issues will remain important barriers, the *Theory* + *Practice* section of AMSR is specifically design to address the two-part access and research design issue.

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Purpose

The *Theory* + *Practice* section is designed to enhance the ability, time, and motivation of marketing academics to hear the voice of the senior executive and translate the voice into a researchable set of issues. This is accomplished by structuring the section into two principle parts. Part I is an interview with a senior marketing (or related field) practitioner who has thought deeply about the marketing issue at hand and has engaged in trial and error in the field. As such, she/he has crystalized a strongly-held, field-based perspective as it relates to the particular marketing challenge. The second part is to enlist a senior marketing scholar to reflect on how she/he might design the research given the observations of the practitioner. The senior scholar, in many cases, will be someone who has engaged in field base research. However, it need not be the case. The key is that the scholar has a track record of establishing new areas of inquiry and building interesting conceptual frameworks. As such, the section is an efficient way to access managerial problems (time), illustrate how a researcher could craft a potential research topic (ability), and identify research problems that can lead to publications in our best journals (motivation).

Our aim is to impact research scholarship in two ways. First, a researcher may decide to pursue research on the topic covered in the interview and explored by the scholar. Second, the researcher may pursue her/his own field-based conversations on topics that are close to *her/his* research agenda. In this second scenario, as a result of the *Theory* + *Practice* section, the researcher can more clearly see how to connect interview findings and research questions. As a result, they extrapolate the approach to their own research agenda. We would be exceptionally pleased with either (or both) of these outcomes.

Why do this type of research?

Before providing the exact details on the structure of the section, it is perhaps worth reflecting for a moment on the reason why a scholar may decide to purse practice-based research. Most importantly, I would make an argument that many of the most important articles, and research streams, in our discipline began with practice. Work on topics such as service quality, brand equity, market orientation, lifetime value of customers, and market-based assets all led to important awards, thousands of citations, and, simultaneously, impacted the practice of marketing. Several of the most cited and awarded scholars in the discipline haven taken this route. While it is a road well traveled by some of our most innovative marketing scholars, it is a route that is less traveled by a new generation of marketing academics.

While research impact may be a sufficient motivation to do field research, there are several additional reasons to take this route. First, it is fun. It is exciting to engage with smart practitioners on interesting, novel, and provocative ideas and concepts. One can learn a tremendous amount during the interview that can inform both teaching and research.

Second, I would contend that it is a much easier way to discover *new* marketing concepts or *linkages* between concepts – as compared to mining academic literature. The work on the definition and scope of market orientation would not have been possible without extensive conversations with practitioners (Kohli and Jaworski 1990). Asking a CMO a simple question such as "what are the most difficult issues that you are struggling with today?" – can open the door to a whole new set of ideas. In our inaugural interview with Nabil Shabshab, Worldwide President of Becton, Dickinson and Company's (BD) Diabetes and Digital Health Division (formerly CMO of BD) he mentions the term "evidence-based marketing." As far as I know, this term (and the underlying marketing philosophy driving this concept) has not been the subject of research to date. This is one simple example. The Shabshab interview actually introduces several new concepts.

Regarding linkages between concepts – one can simply ask managers their view about accepted wisdom – or ask about exceptions to accepted wisdom. For example, within the market orientation literature, one could ask "Can you give me an example of when being market oriented led to more sales?" followed by "Are their situations in your work experience where being more market oriented actually *decreased* sales?" These two questions, in combination, can trigger a couple of research options. The first is to pursue research that challenges conventional wisdom. A great paper title could be "The Dark Side of Market Orientation: How Market Orientation Decreases Firm Performance." The second option is to look for moderators. Under what conditions does market orientation lead to increased (or decreased) sales? It may be the case that when there are radical, discontinuous innovations, obtaining marketplace intelligence is less valuable since it is very difficult to define the breadth and scope of the market.

Third, there is very low risk. Conducting a few exploratory interviews takes very little time. For any project, one does not need to conduct 75 interviews to ascertain if the interviews are paying off in terms of new ideas and learning. If new ideas are emerging in the first few interviews – wonderful – keep going. If not, it is easy to shut down the project. So, it is relatively easy to run a "field experiment" on finding novel insights.

Structure of section

To address the two-step access challenge, we have organized the *Theory + Practice* section into two parts. Each is briefly described below:

Part I: The interview

Placing the practice problem in context

We begin the section by placing the interview in context. After a brief biography of the interview candidate and relevant work history, we describe the industry and firm dynamics to better understand the nature of the problem and the specific firm challenges. In our first interview in this AMSR issue, we discuss the journey to be customer driven and the emergence of solutions with Nabil Shabshab. To understand the context, we provide a brief overview of the medical device industry dynamics and the strategy of BD.

We will focus on what we believe to be significant marketing problems that lend themselves to multiple research approaches. Moreover, since the problems are significant, no single research study is likely to solve the problem. Hence, it is more likely that a body of work – from multiple scholars and vantage points – will be needed to inform the issue. For BD, both the journey to be customer driven and the evolution of solutions are two such examples.

Interview with senior marketing executive – Hunting for important problems

The interview will be conducted by a senior marketing scholar. The interview will typically entail 5–7 questions that focus on one or two topics. The topics will be: (a) broad in scope, (b) tough to solve with one research study, and (c) important and timely for marketing practice. In our inaugural interview, I assume the role of interviewer.

While the senior marketing scholar will discuss the interview with the senior marketing executive prior to conversation, it will often be the case that the executive response will trigger new ideas. Thus, the senior marketing scholar has discretion to modify the interview real time – to pursue interesting issues as they emerge. For the first interview, as noted above, the conversation took a bit of a detour on the concept of "evidence-based marketing." It is a new idea, so I took the liberty of exploring the issue in a bit more detail.

The result will be a field-based perspective on a particular issue and the challenges that the firm (or executive faced) in attempting to make progress. Put in academic terms, the interview will focus on both the dependent variable (i.e., the issue) as well as some of the potential independent variables that impact success (i.e., what factors seem to predict improve on the issue? What factors seem to create barriers to progress?). For example, for the journey to be customer driven, Shabshab surfaced issues related to the need to deeply commit to the journey as well as the need to identify "levers" of change to start the journey.

Reflections – The path forward

The section will end with a brief commentary by the interviewer. She/he will reflect on the interview and provide additional perspective on potential future research. Recognizing that there is a more thorough commentary to follow, the reflections section will pursue a different perspective on the issue.

Taking a different tack than Ulaga (2018), I briefly note, for example, that successful journeys often have clear "triggers" and "roadmaps." In other words, what are the factors that trigger the journey itself? And, how often does one need to either "hit the restart button" on the change journey – or modify the course of that journey? The road to being customer oriented is often full of potholes – or, worst case, dead-ends.

Part II: Scholar commentary

Crafting the research: Invited scholar commentary

The interview will differ from typical interviews found in magazines, or on popular television programs, in that the interviews are designed to spark potential research questions. As such, we invite a scholar to propose potential research questions that can be explored based on the interview content. This will require some extrapolation from the interview quotes – to identify researchable topics. We will not expect the scholar to provide a detailed review of a theory and methodology, instead we expect the scholar to provide preliminary ideas, approaches, and frameworks to address the issue. Think of these comments as early stage exploration for how the topic may be investigated. Once again, our bias here is to focus on topics and a research design that can lead to a publication in a top journal.

In our first commentary, Wolfgang Ulaga surfaces three potential research topics for both the customer journey and solutions (Ulaga 2018). For example, for the journey, Ulaga notes that senior executives must encourage and facilitate new behaviors on the part of marketers (and other employees), build new competencies, and identify new metrics to judge progress. These ideas form the building blocks of potential new concepts/variables that can be explored as predictors of successful customer centric journeys.

Criteria for selection of central topic and senior executive

Three criteria dominate the selection of the focal topic:

- The problem is significant for marketing practice (Kohli 2017a). The touchstone would be if we told a CMO of a Fortune 500 firm we were investigating the problem the CMO would say – "that is important for our firm."
- It cannot be solved with one study. It is a broader issue – one that can precipitate a body of research on the topic.
- It is new or relatively new to the marketing discipline. The section is "hunting" for new practice-based marketing concepts – or those that have been under-investigated by the field. Ajay Kohli (Kohli 2017b) terms these indigenous marketing concepts.

As for the interviewee – there are two major considerations.

- The interviewee has spent time and money trying to solve the marketing problem.
- The interviewee is conceptually oriented. This requires a bit of explanation. My experience suggests that there are some practitioners who think conceptually and have reflected deeply on the focal problem. Like most academics, they enjoy the process of thinking about why an increase in X leads to an increase in Y. Often these practitioners look for frameworks (e.g., Porter Five Forces) that can help them understand an issue. A conceptually oriented CMO would be able to answer (and have fun with) the question of when market orientation leads to more sales – or less sales. In effect, they would provide the interviewee with a few independent variables to consider. A non-conceptual CMO would struggle with the question.

Submission of ideas by potential authors

As currently organized, the section Editor selects the topics, interviewee, and invites the marketing scholar to comment. This approach enables the journal to efficiently and effectively launch this section. However, after the first few subsections are published, we would encourage authors to reach out to the section Editor – to discuss ideas for future issues. This may lead to "guest editing" a particular issue.

Concluding thoughts

As noted at the outset, the aim is to spark research on important marketing problems. We hope the section has impact beyond the issues explored in the journal. A wonderful outcome would be that the section stimulates scholars to engage more with thoughtful marketing practitioners – to increase the quality of their teaching and research.

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