Cust. Need. and Solut. (2015) 2:113–118
DOI 10.1007/s40547-015-0042-3

PERSPECTIVES

JB Steenkamp on the Success of Marketing Scholarship in Netherlands

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Published online: 9 April 2015

Abstract One of the initiatives at *Customer Needs and Solutions* (*CNS*) is to encourage the development of top marketing scholarship in emerging markets, especially in China and India. This will not only help develop the scholars there but also help highlight critical marketing problems unique to these markets and encourage research on understudied segments (see editorial: *CNS as Venture Capitalist*), which can also inform and enrich marketing theory and practice in general. To this end, CNS wants to document and share the lessons learned from the Netherlands, one of the most successful transformations of marketing scholarship at the country level. Rajdeep Grewal (Raj), one of CNS's senior editors, sat down with Jan-Benedict E.M. Steenkamp (JB) who has personified this remarkable transformation, to reflect on this journey and share his perspectives on related issues. Excerpts of this interview are printed here, and the videotaped interview is available in the public domain.

Keywords

Raj: Can you briefly summarize how marketing, as a discipline, has evolved in the Netherlands?

JB: Marketing in the Netherlands started in the 1950s and 1960s. Marketing originated from economics, because in the earlier days we didn't have business schools in the Netherlands and marketing was part of the school of economics. We had a number of pioneers who are internationally not so well known, but they were really good thinkers.

These pioneers were largely focused on writing in Dutch. In the 1970s and 1980s, the scope of publishing broadened. Some people started to write more in English, and also the scientific "sourcing" broadened from almost exclusively economics to strategy and psychology, as well as statistics.

Nowadays, these different areas are covered, and when you look at the academic publications coming from Dutch universities, the productivity per capita has become pretty high.

Raj: Was the growth of marketing academics in the Netherlands due to a national policy, or were there any other university level decisions, or some other systems that resulted in this course?

JB: Several things had been very important. At the national level, the government instituted a research assessment exercise modeled after the UK. Which meant that every 5 years, and it's still going on, all departments in the Netherlands are being evaluated by an independent committee, with non-Dutch nationals involved, that evaluates the quality of the academic research, and rates each department on different criteria.

That has become pretty important for allocation of funds, but the national level has been actually less important than two other things. First, in the 1980s, two well-respected economists started to rate the publication performance of economists and business academics in the preceding 5 years, using a defined list of top journals. This became known as the "Economists Top-40," published annually in a business magazine. That proved to be an eye-opener. Many established scholars who thought that they were really good did not figure very prominently on that list, while young and upcoming researchers did surprisingly well. People started to feel the need to produce more output in these top journals. That was a "private" initiative. The top-40

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list also had a separate Table with the total publication score for each business school.

Finally at 2-3 universities in the Netherlands, Tilburg, Erasmus, and Groningen, the deans of the business school decided that they were going to improve the research performance. They were inspired by their school's low ratingon that Top-40 list. Research output became the deciding factor for teaching load, salary increases, and promotion. That was a first in the Netherlands. And importantly, research output was based on a select list of top journals. Minor journals did not count.

The result was that strong tangible and social incentives were created to be successful in top journals. Such incentives were really important because we all know that it is vastly more difficult to publish in a top journal than in a lesser journal. Before this was in place, any international publication was rated more or less equally, which incentivized people to go for quantity rather than quality.

Raj: One of the key factors in the success of marketing as a discipline is the ability to attract quality doctoral students to it, and to train them and graduate them. How did that progress in the Netherlands?

JB: I would say the biggest unique contribution that the Dutch model has given there is the fact that, at several universities, the marketing department fostered close collaboration with the department of econometrics.

During the course of thier studies, quite some econometrics students find out that they are more interested in "applied" econometrics than in "theoretical" econometrics (for lack of a better word). We worked with the department of econometrics to offer quantitative marketing courses as "applied" courses in their curriculum, and even as concentration. This was attractive for the department of econometrics as well since it increased the interest of students to study econometrics in the first place. After all, the number of students that want to student pure econometrics is small.Many of our best PhD students come from those programs.

Later, what you'll also find is that quite some psychology students, were attracted to a slightly more applied side, if you will. We also benefit from the fact that our undergraduate program and our Masters programare integrated because few people drop out in between. Further, our university education is generally of high scientific quality. It is not always that practical, but scientifically it is pretty good. That has been a really good basis of students for our program.

Raj: What environment have you created that encourage scholarship of junior and senior faculty? e.g., compensation, teaching load, service, … ?

JB: The teaching load, generally for junior people, compared to what you see in the US, is fairly low. Many junior people teach one, perhaps two courses per year, plus a few bachelor thesis supervisions, that is all.

That makes it attractive for people who really want to focus on research to stay in the Netherlands. They do realize that in the U.S. they earn more money, but in the Netherlands, they may be able to invest even morein their future as researchers.

Of course you cannot keep everybody, but it does mean that we have something to offer. The same goes in terms of the salary. In the past, that was all government mandated, completely independent of performance. That is not the case anymore.

Raj: Is the Netherlands model built on a few stars such as yourself, or is there emphasis on increasing average research productivity?

JB: I leave the designation of a star to other people, but it is true that the model initially started with a few stars. Those were people who had this ambition to reach for the top. I think any country needs some stars to provide role models, to show other people that it is possible.

The first wave of, let's say established researchers, trained new PhD students, and instilled in them a desire to go beyond mediocrity. For example, four of my PhD students are currently full professors in the Netherlands, and two others are in the US. And I am not alone in this regard. These former PhD students train others and one gets a multiplier effect.

Raj: How would you describe the relationship between the Dutch scholars and the scholars in North America? Specifically if you want to think about it, is the success largely due to return of Dutch scholars from North America, or the coming of age of the scholars trained in the Netherlands?

JB: It's absolutely the second. Very few scholars that have gone to the United States have come back to the Netherlands. Those people that have come back, I think are for family reasons. That may have to do with the fact that if you have done your PhD in the US, you may not be very interested to come back to the Netherlands.

Perhaps it is a lifestyle issue, or there are some other issues as well. The success is mostly due to Dutch PhD students, or students from Europe that do their PhD in the Netherlands, and that stay there.

Raj: One thing that the Netherlands has succeeded in quite a bit compared to other countries is attracting and maintaining balance, so there is no brain drain, so to say. Would you like to comment on that, how they have done much better than others?

JB: There is some brain drain, because some Europeans, some Dutchmen have left. For example, I'm currently at UNC and Michel Wedel is at Maryland, for example. Let's say on average it tends to be modest.

Some people really like to live in the Netherlands, for family reasons or because of the lifestyle. But realistically speaking that is not going to work if there are no other things that can help.

As I said before, what you have in the Netherlands now is that if you are a top level researcher your teaching load is very light. It's much lower than what you would have in the United

States. The Netherlands has government mandated maximum salaries for full professors, but actually you can top that off with a whole lot extra. The model has become much more competitive than it used to be.

That goes, actually, completely against the Dutch culture of everybody being equal, which kind of suggests that other countries can do that, too. The Dutch model is not consistent with the Dutch culture, that excellence is rewarded so much.

Raj: What is the relationship in the Netherlands between academics and practitioners? Are there some certain unique aspects of the Netherlands since you are also very familiar with the US market and emerging markets? Could you highlight those?

JB: The relationship between marketing practice and marketing academia in the Netherlands tends to be quite close. There is a lot of collaboration going on. Marketing scholars want data and these can be obtained relatively easily from companies because the Netherlands is a high trust society.

We don't need big contracts. Essentially when we trust each other you get the data and it goes on like that. To illustrate, the research institute I am heading (AiMark) is global but started out in the Netherlands. Still, the non-disclosure agreement is only one page for data whose commercial value is huge.

The Netherlands is not unique. Germany is an example of a country where this is even stronger. All this is quite different from my experience in the US where due to its legal culture, it takes a lot more time and effort to secure data.

Raj: Would you comment on the role of the European Marketing Association and the IJRM (*International Journal of Research in Marketing*) with the Dutch view on it?

JB: The European Marketing Academy and the IJRM, its official journal, an extremely good journal, have been very important. For a number of people that are starting to go from local to a more international scope, those are the first touch points. Attending an EMAC conference is cheaper than flying across the ocean. It may be one of the first times that you encounter international scholars from all parts of the world. I think it makes it a lot more accessible to Dutch scholars but also to non-Dutch scholars.

IJRM is very open to research being done with European data. These days, by the way, I think that also applies to the American journals, but still IJRM feels closer to home.

Raj: Along similar lines, would you like to comment on North American society such as AMA, INFORMS?

JB: Things have changed a whole lot. When I submitted my first paper to JMR together with my friend Michel Wedel, one of the reviewers said, "Don't you have American data?" (We had Dutch data to which we applied a new segmentation model. To his credit, the editor, by the way, ignored this "criticism", which was great. The point is, that was 1991. This is not the case anymore noted. There is much greater interest, even eagerness, for international data from all parts of the world but especially from China and India.

Associations like AMA and INFORMS have become really global organizations in their own right. One can even argue that the name American Marketing Association is not completely consistent with what this organization really stands for, having so many international members.

Raj: At least in academia.

JB: True.

Raj: You and many other scholars from the Netherlands have spent considerable time at many universities in the US even when you were working in the Netherlands. How important were such visits, and how do you gauge the productivity of such?

JB: Those visits have been, for me, crucial, and I don't know any of my colleagues in the Netherlands who spent some time here for whom that wasn't crucial. Let me just give you one anecdote. The first time I was on sabbatical was at Penn State in 1989-1990.

At a social get together early in my stay Harish Sujan asked me, "To which journal did you submit your dissertation paper?" I said, "Well, I submitted it to…" Let me not mention the journal, but let's say it's a lesser journal. Harish said, "Why did you submit it to that journal?" The truth was,the editor saw me present the paper at an EMAC conference and asked me to submit the article to his journal. I was flattered as it was an international journal after all. However, when that Harish asked this seemingly innocent question I had an experience like Saint Paul traveling to Damascus. In one flash that I'll never forget, everything became clear to me. Few people read that journal, and even fewer cared about it. What I learned there and then was one of the most important things in my career, namely that there's a huge difference between the top journals and other journals. I was completely unaware of that. Call me naïve, but that was the situation at the time.

The second thing is I started to do research together with people at Penn State, most importantly with Hans Baumgartner and Nirmalya Kumar who became good friends. I continued to do research with them for many years. In fact, my latest publication with Nirmalya was a book and an HBR article published in 2013. I know that a lot of other people who have had the same experience.

Raj: If you compare today the Netherlands to other European countries, one could say with reasonable confidence that Netherlands is leading the other European countries in terms of, at least, marketing academic research. In your understanding, what are the reasons for that?

JB: I think one of the reasons is that we all started out as local players, writing in our local language. However, if you are from the Germanic or the French world you could say with some reasonable confidence that it is a fairly important language area. Nobody can argue that Dutch is an important language area.

Thus earlier than some other countries we had the push to go international because we could never uphold the fiction that writing in Dutch was equal to writing in a language that everybody could read. I think the other countries took longer, and sometimes there might be some nationalism. In some countries, you are required by law to write your dissertation in the local language.

But in the last 10-15 years, things have changed in other countries, most notably Germany. You again see that a few people can make a difference. Germany has become a very productive area, and many of the students that are very productive are students of Sönke Albers.

He was one of the Germans who really took his ambition to a global level. He trained many students with that ambition. That has accelerated the process.

Raj: Can the Netherland, the model at Netherland be mimicked by other countries? Can they succeed with such a mimicking strategy?

JB: I think so. Because Germany as I just mentioned is one of these countries that has mimicked it. There is no reason why other countries, both in Europe and in other parts of the world, cannot do the same thing.

To me, what really makes the point is whether we really believe that we go for top quality as opposed to sticking to a fiction that writing for local journals is equally good and difficult. Whether it is a local journal in China, India, France, or the U.K. it is not even remotely the same as writing for an international top journal. These local journals are essentially monopolistic competitors. And we all know that is suboptimal.

Raj: To conclude the discussion at least on the Netherland part, are there any other thoughts or any other factors for the success of the Netherlands that you would like to share, or that you may not have covered, that come to mind at this point in time?

JB: I think English fluency is crucial. I want to emphasize mastery of English is something that has to be learned by everybody who is not native English-speaking. Whether they are Dutch, Indian, French, or Chinese, we all have to learn today's lingua franca. Without English fluency, there is no future for you in academia, at least as I see it. Perhaps the language of academic discourse will be different in a few decades – after all, it was largely German before World War II, French before then, and Latin even earlier. But that will not help current cohorts of emerging scholars.

Raj: Moving to marketing scholarship in general. Typically it is, maybe not official but accepted that marketing scholars are divided into three areas, in alphabetical order, behavioral, managerial, and quant groups. In fact there is no single conference that these scholars seem to attend most of the time. Based on your experience and perspective, do you see these three groups further diverge in the future or converge? What are role of the three groups in the future of marketing, in your perspective?

JB: I think it's a little sad that we who in our papers develop elaborate theories and complex models simplify the world so much as if, let's say, they are not mixing different elements. Like for example, the moment that you analyze household scanner data with quantitative models, you are, doing behavioral research. After all, you are studying real behavior.

Acknowledging your point, it is indeed true. AMA is primarily managerial, ACR is primarily behavioral, and Marketing Science Conference is primarily quant. A nice thing of EMAC is that it is all three.

In the future we will get a closer convergence between quant and managerial because a lot of the quantitative researchers want to address managerially relevant questions, or they have to do it to be able to get company data.

The behavioral area is less dependent on data from, say, commercial providers or companies. I don't see strong convergence as yet between the behavioral on the one hand and the managerial and quant on the other hand, which is disappointing.

Raj: If a country wants to develop the marketing scholarship within the country, what do you suggest to do? Should they have a focused approach? focus on one of the three areas? Or should they have more of a distributed approach where they try to basically develop each of the three areas?

JB: Countries are too large, and interests and capabilities to heterogeneous to focus on one area only. Thus, I don't think a country should specialize. Ultimately marketing science moves forward by new insights in all these areas. However, at the level of an individual marketing department, focusing on one area versus another may make sense, if that allows you to create synergies, and to become a destination group for researchers in a specific area. The, unfortunately frequently occurring, unproductive tensions between the areas, sometimes even associated with a zero-sum mentality, may be another reason to focus on a specific area at the departmental level. But again, at the country level, these arguments would not hold.

Raj: Can you broadly share your perspective on the future of marketing research and scholarship? Feel free to comment on things like what type of research problems may be studied in the future, the metrics that may be used, and how then your standards and promotion standards would change.

JB: I think tenure and promotion standards are ever going to be tougher. In some countries where, say, tenure standards are still relatively easy, the tenure standards will tighten because these countries and their universities will want to claim their place in our field.

In the United States, they continue to be tightened because deans seem to be ever more cautious to give people tenure. Essentially you give a contract for life and the recent financial challenges (and cuts in funding) have shown that that can be an issue. Realistically speaking, the standards will only increase.

Then in terms of the research problems, ultimately people will do whatever they want. Big data, business analytics, marketing decisions based on analytical decision-making, and digital marketing will receive more attention in the future, but that should hardly be seen as a surprise. Companies have singled out these areas as worthy of study for some time.

Moreover, increasingly, companies globalize. For example, many of the S&P500 companies obtain more than 50 % of their revenues in overseas markets. Yet, we still know remarkably little about the role of the institutional and cultural context on decision-making, and the effectiveness of marketing strategies.

Raj: How many hours, assuming there are no other obligations, do you think a doctor student or a junior faculty should spend on research each week? Does that vary, or the expectations vary, or do you think the expectation should vary across countries?

JB: How many hours of sleep do you need? There is a monotonic, if not near-linear, relationship between the number of hours that you put into your work and career success. Especially in the beginning, you need more time as you haven't acquired experience conceptualizing, analyzing, and writing your papers.

There are some people that go into academia with perhaps the expectation of having a 40 h week. However, very few people will be able to make an international career with that number of hours, unless you're Einstein. Einstein wrote his famous four Nobel-Prize level articles while having a full time non-academic job. But I think Einstein was pretty unique…

Raj: You spend a considerable time in emerging markets, especially China and India. Would you have any advice or food for thought that you would like to share with the marketing discipline in China and India, or any other country?

JB: China and India have a number of very prestigious institutions, with people who are breathtakingly smart, also their PhD students. But currently, their prestige may be more local than global. They may not be prestigious because they are really at the international top in terms of academic output. If you are at such an institution, you are a local hero. But actually internationally, it doesn't really mean that much. I don't think that this is a situation that is satisfactory. In fact, when I talk with people at these Chinese and Indian top institutions, I notice that there is a great interest and willingness to make their institutions also top-notch internationally in terms of research. How to do that? Of course, I can't tell them what to do but here are some ideas.

The first thing I believe has to be done is to make clear what counts as top research, and what does not. Simply, define the rules of the game. The easiest way to do this is to define a list of top-journals. Those lists are available. The most prominent are the Business Week list, the UT Dallas list, and the Financial Times list. There's some variation, but essentially I think that has to be the metric. I use a simple question to determine what is a top journal: 'If you would only publish in this journal, would you get tenure at a top-20 business school in the world?' If the answer is 'yes', it is a top journal; if the answer is 'no', it is not. If you want, add a list of "very good journals" to the top list, but be careful here as this set will be less unambiguously defined and there is thus more potential for gaming the system. Evaluate research performance using that list. I know it is tough in the beginning, with fairly few papers counting toward good performance, but it works. You set the performance criteria and people will work to meet those criteria. As we talked earlier about, it worked in the Netherlands.

Second, let there be consequences. If you publish in these top journals, you get a lower teaching load, higher salary increase, tenure, or promotion. If there are no consequences, the effects will be minor. It makes sense to have relatively lenient criteria (in terms of number of top publications) early on, but increase the criteria over time. What you will see that over time, output will increase as people respond to incentives. One example: the score that would get you in the top-5 in the in the first Economists Top-40 in the Netherlands, would not even get you in the top-40 a decade later.

Third, while in the beginning, the consequences should be primarily positive, over time, also introduce negative consequences. People who do not publish should get a higher teaching load. This helps also make the system more feasible as it will be more "teaching-credit neutral."

Fourth, the experience in the Netherlands, and my interactions with Indian and Chinese colleagues suggest that it might be advisable to involve people who do not have a vested interest in designing/monitoring the system – such as foreigners. Because any internal change will create resistance and outsiders may be perceived to be more impartial than insiders. This is quite common in some other countries.

Fifth, handle the challenges and opportunities of what in China are called 'sea turtles (海归). I have noticed this first hand. Indian and Chinese retuning faculty get salaries that tend to be rather low compared to salaries in the U.S. but their opportunities for consulting are enticing – helped by their foreign PhD and overseas experience, and the high status of the Indian/Chinese university. Utility maximizing behavior suggests that the person shifts their emphasis from research to consulting. Yet, these sea turtles can do much to raise the research productivity of the department and to train the new generation of local PhDs. Giving them the right incentives is crucial, especially if they are hired with tenure.

Sixth, establish exchange partnerships with foreign marketing departments. Do not necessarily rely on university- or even business school level partnerships as true collaborative relations are fostered at the departmental, if not personal level. Send PhD students for a year to that "sister" department, consider faculty sabbaticals, create opportunities for faculty at the "sister" department to spend some time at your place and create permanent visiting professorships. Do not 'source' only overseas country nationals. You will benefit from broad and diverse input. Most of the collaborations that really work start at the personal level. These relations lead also to future top publications.

Raj: Any other final thoughts to share?

JB: Well, we have covered a lot of ground! The only thing that I would like to share is that, at the end of the day, there is no magic bullet. If I look at myself, and most other Dutch marketing scholars, all of our education was at a Dutch university, with all courses taught in Dutch. The first thing that I ever wrote in English was a conference paper. And my God, that was hard work. I sweated it out, one sentence after the other.

The point is, if Michel Wedel can do it, if Rik Pieters can do it, if Harald van Heerde can do it, if I can do it, and many others can do it, I don't see any reason why a young Indian, Chinese or Mexican PhD student or assistant professor can't do it either. English is not our native language.

Unless you believe that Dutchmen are genetically more intelligent than Indians, Chinese, or Mexicans. I do not subscribe to that point of view! So what are we waiting for?

Raj: Thank you very much.

JB: You're welcome.