Merlin Stone

is research director at The Customer Framework. He is author or co-author of many articles and thirty books on customer management. He is an Honorary Life Fellow of the UK's Institute of Direct and Digital Marketing.

Opinion Piece

Co-operation between academics and practitioners — hope for the future?

Merlin Stone

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Abstract

This piece explores how academic writers can make their work more relevant to practitioners, and what practitioners can do to help them in this.

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On Friday, 18 October this year, the CRM and Services Marketing Special Interest Group of the Academy of Marketing,¹ together with Oxford Brookes University (where I am a Visiting Professor), held a session at the IDM entitled ‘CRM...R.I.P.’ The panel which led the discussion included David Beard (Sage), Gareth Mitchell-Jones (IBM), Dr Jason Pridmore (Erasmus University), Professor Yuksel Ekinci (Oxford Brookes), Felix Velarde (Underwired) and me. Underneath the lively discussion on the main topic lay another theme — the relationship between business school academics and practitioners. This topic surfaced towards the end, when the group was discussing next steps in furthering co-operation between the participants.

As one who has had a good career in industry and academia, I have developed strong views on the topic — but not stable ones! About ten years ago I sided with Malcolm McDonald, who published several articles on the (poor) direction marketing had taken and how this had been aggravated by the divergence between business and academic priorities.²

However, my opinion has changed as a result of my involvement in several commercial projects, in which practitioners were keen to understand what academics could contribute to their thinking about eminently practical topics. My suggestion to my clients was that, if you are prepared to spend relatively small amounts, you can access the work done by hundreds of academics all over the world on your topic. The rapid growth in business education has led to an explosion in the number of academic researchers into business — whether members of university staff anxious to publish in order to be promoted, or postgraduate students producing theses. There has been a dark side to this, driven by the

Merlin Stone
The Customer Framework.
Lily Hill House, Lily Hill Road, Ascot,
Berkshire, RG12 2SJ, UK.
Tel: +44 7968 271937;
E-mail: merlin.stone@
thecustomerframework.com

marketisation of universities. Both academics and practitioners should be aware of the risks of this.^{3,4}

Of course, the desire to publish only in top-quality academic journals has led to a degree of sterility and possible lack of relevance in the approach to article production. The norm now is extensive, but usually relatively uncritical literature review, derivation of hypotheses to be tested on what may not be a representative sample — often students — identification of further research requirements and of management implications based on relatively weak understanding of issues actually faced by practitioners.

I have worked on many commercial projects that started with a review of what academics have produced — and some of them have led to academic publications as well. I am now confident that despite this risk of sterility, between 10 and 20 per cent of the articles I review have material in them that is useful, often highly useful, to practitioners. It is a numbers game. Typically, I have to read around a hundred articles for each project. Of course, I don't read them word-for-word, but scan the summaries quickly to look for jewels, then dig deeper where my hope is raised by the early paragraphs.

Producing an article that is genuinely useful to practitioners is today a bit hit-and-miss. It should not be. Much can be done, even within the constraints imposed by the academic 'publish or perish' culture. Academics' role is to research behaviour and codify it, producing frameworks that will be relevant and useful to other researchers and to practitioners. Here are my suggestions as to how academics can improve relevance, which they are now required to do in many countries by demonstrating an 'impact factor'. I have also listed some things that practitioners can do to assist — and therefore get more value.

Academics should:

What academics should do

- Read and understand 'grey literature' (what a term for publications produced not by academics, but by consultancies, analysts, other experts, the trade press and the like!), in particular for what it says about discussions among practitioners, where they have problems and where academics can help by clarifying meaning, exploding myths, demonstrating biases and bad research.
- Pursue a more balanced portfolio approach, aiming to publish not just in the best academic journals, but also what have come to be called academic-practitioner journals (where the authors come from both sides), and in the grey literature, which they therefore must read.
- Attend conferences where practitioner issues are presented and discussed by practitioners and experts.
- Become real experts in issues, not dilettantes. This means creating personal brands as experts. This in turn means maintaining the focus for years, possibly decades.
- When writing about management implications, identify which managers they are writing for and give more detail on how to apply their recommendations, based upon their reading of the grey literature.

- Provide titling and writing that practitioners will understand.
- Put on academic/practitioner conferences, seeking sponsorship or at least presence from key suppliers.
- Form alliances with different types of players — clients, systems and marketing services suppliers — to help them resolve skills issues by recruitment and training, working closely with relevant professional institutes.

Senior academics have a particularly important responsibility to make all this happen, by:

- Guiding young researchers.
- Supporting applications for funding to attend practitioner conferences;
- Becoming involved with senior practitioners, not to solicit funding from them, but to learn about their problems.

Practitioners should:

What practitioners can do to help

- Be open to these approaches, and realise the value academics can generate by research, skills development, etc.
- When dealing with difficult or new topics, consider what academics are saying, perhaps allocating small research budgets to commission literature searches.
- Consider whether they want to develop themselves academically, by taking postgraduate degrees.

One area that needs to be watched is the role of Visiting Professorships, which have become somewhat degraded as a market for professorial titles has developed. Universities appointing practitioners to such posts should establish clear contracts with identified deliverables on both sides. In my view, this should not be sponsorship (universities are budget-hungry and have tended to focus on this), but about increasing the teamwork between academics and practitioners. The good news about the existence of the market in Visiting Professorship is that practitioners clearly value them!

In conclusion, there is much value in academic research into business, but it is not always easy to excavate. If my recommendations are followed, it could become much easier.

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