
Editorial: What do you want from your universities?

There is much to commend in the way business schools have risen to the challenge of meeting demand for well-trained students. In the face of falling incomes per student in real terms, pressures from quality assurance inspectors (we are currently repeating all the mistakes of the total quality management era in the commercial sector) and tough competition from corporate colleges, business schools continue to grow. Careers in both IT and marketing are right at the top of the list of jobs students want when they leave. This success story however only looks at half the picture: the 'teaching' side may be OK but what about research?

Practitioners reading this journal are part of the comparatively rare breed of manager that takes an interest in the latest thinking. Good for you. Another wise move is to examine a journal that places a premium on plain English in communicating its work. Most academic journals are difficult to follow, some are impossible. This would not be surprising in chemistry, but this is marketing for goodness sake. Academic marketers will, as part of their teaching, discuss the need for powerful communication to cut through clutter. As part of their research, many of the same academics lapse into pretentious academic jargon at the drop of a hat.

At the heart of the debate is the question: what sort of relationship do marketing and business academics and commercial practitioners want with each

other? Closer to home, what about the interface between direct and database marketing professionals and database marketing specialists in academia? This is the subject of my commentary paper. At the moment most relationships that exist have emerged from private contacts.

There is nothing wrong with this, but both parties have much to gain through closer working. I am currently benefiting from a unique collaboration that my place of work, Bristol Business School, has just established with Harrison Troughton Wunderman. The arrangement is that one day per fortnight of my time is to be spent on projects of joint interest to the agency and the business school. High profile, flagship research investigating the latest trends in database marketing and consumer behaviour will result. As well as journal papers, trade press releases describing the most exciting findings will help the agency's positioning as thoughtful and challenging conventional wisdoms. Meanwhile, Bristol Business School has priceless opportunities to get close to cutting-edge marketing practice. Both sides can learn from each other.

Those who wish to break down the academic-practice barriers can start by asking what both sides have in common. For me, this is a mutual interest in searching for *insights* into commercial and business life. We may crudely divide up marketing professionals into two camps: those who say, without question, 'these are the rules — this is how it's done'. The second camp are the natural constituents

of this journal. They will be thoughtful, reflective, often questioning conventional wisdoms. Most important, they are looking for a better understanding of how the world works, so that they can get an edge in their work.

There are also dangers here, however. Stone, Woodcock and Starkey warn of the conflicts of interest generated by the pressures on business schools to generate money for universities. At the absolute core of the power of university research is the assumption that it is independent and neutral of any personal interest. Stone *et al.* warn that this has started to fray at the edges. Perhaps we should warn of SUGOA syndrome — Selling Under the Guise of Academia. My take on their paper, however, is that these authors are most strongly advocating a robust and thorough approach to gathering knowledge. If part of this means watching out for less scrupulous consultants and academics then so be it. The best way of seeing through fads is to be knowledgeable oneself — all the more reason for closer links with

(scrupulous) business researchers in business schools.

Behram Hansotia reminds us that heaven comes to those who wait. There is a diffusion process through which knowledge, wherever created, has to travel before it reaches 'mainstream' practice. Some of his stories related in his paper illustrate that there is no magic wand to getting best practice out there into everyday business. He goes on to identify clearly the barriers to effective dissemination, and suggest ways of speeding up the process. Well worth reading.

The remaining papers put into practice some living examples of how academics and practitioners can help each other. Enjoy the read, and if you disagree with any of the controversies raised in some of this issue, then please get back in touch.

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