



# Academic interface with marketing practice: Leading and following and not losing the way?

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## ABSTRACT

While the academic business practice divide in marketing is not new it has recently been getting increased attention. It is suggested the balance between applied problem solving research and basic research can be achieved by placing more emphasis on problem oriented research. To achieve this, academics need to place a greater emphasis on following and interpreting practice rather than thinking they need to always lead practice.

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## 1. Introduction

The issue of the academic-business practice divide in marketing is not new. When I reflect on my academic experience over the last three decades it has been a topic of discussion. From time to time, different groups of academics have diagnosed the issues involved and come up with many constructive suggestions to bridge theory and practice. For example the issue was addressed in a special session at the 1999 ANZMAC conference. In that session I explored the role of ANZMAC as an emerging regional marketing forum for academics in facilitating the interface between academics and practitioners (Brodie, 2001). The “glue” that holds ANZMAC members together is the common interest in research. What the organisation offers are ways of facilitating and increasing research productivity. This is reflected in the ANZMAC objectives, which are:

- providing networks and forums for research and supporting young researchers;
- encouraging variety of methodological approaches and research;
- recognizing excellence in scholarly research and contributions to the marketing discipline;
- developing agendas for research topics and providing publication outlets

Of particular relevance to the issue of bridging the academic-business practice divide is the way we recognize how academics contribute to the marketing discipline and how we define excellence in scholarly research. Related to these issues are the way academic research agendas are developed and the way the quality of the research outputs is judged.

## 2. Problem oriented research

Within a research community such as ANZMAC there are a range of perspectives about the role of research which lead to different research approaches. At one extreme is the view that the emphasis should be on marketing being a professional discipline and thus the research undertaken needs to have practical application and must solve real world problems. At the other extreme is an academic perspective where the emphasis is on undertaking research that leads to publications in the leading international journals. To reach the requirements of leading academic journals the research needs to be rigorous and there is less emphasis on practical application.

The recent guest editorial in the *Journal of Marketing* titled “Is Marketing Academia Losing its Way?” by Reibstein et al. (2009) suggests that in the US the leading business schools do not have the right balance between the professional and academic perspectives. They suggest that the predominance of this academic perspective is leading to an alarming and growing gap between the interests, standards, and priorities of academic marketers and the needs of marketing executives operating in an ambiguous, uncertain, fast-changing, and complex market-space. This leads them to conclude that the divide between the two perspectives has gone beyond the familiar dilemma of academic research pitted against practical relevance and is *undermining* the discipline.

I suggest that within the ANZMAC research community we can avoid the trap created by elite US business schools. Between the professional and academic extremes is a more pragmatic perspective. This recognizes that the marketing discipline is an applied social science and hence there needs to be a balance between applied problem solving research and basic research. Rather than view the academic practice as a divide away from business practice, why not see it as a creative tension? This implies academic research needs to have a “problem orientation” rather than be “problem solving”

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which means that academic research does not need to solve specific problems but it needs to be *relevant* to the problem areas facing business. Thus the challenge for the discipline is to identify problem areas and research agendas that have relevance to business practice. To achieve this, academics need to place a greater emphasis on *following* and *interpreting* practice rather than thinking they need to always lead practice. This process does not necessarily exclude research that is motivated by curiosity without immediate application, but the curiosity will be stimulated by the interface with practice.

### 3. Facilitating the interface

What the *Journal of Marketing* editorial fails to pay attention to is the various mechanisms that already exist to facilitate interactions between marketing academics and business practice that ensure relevance to the areas for research. In the special session at ANZMAC (Brodie, 2001) I drew attention to the fact that within the ANZMAC community there is a good proportion of educators who have come from industry, or are doing consulting, or are teaching part-time. In addition, useful experience can come from contact with executive students. Practical experience can also come from undertaking industry and government-funded research projects. Many business schools have industry advisory boards and industry and government-funded research centers. The question arises as to whether these mechanisms are adequate, or does ANZMAC need to take other initiatives to set its research agenda and ensure its relevance? For example, in North America there are industry-funded organizations that have the specific objectives of managing the interface between business and academic research. Two such organisations are the Marketing Science Institute (MSI) and the Institute for the Study of Business Markets (ISBM). Both MSI and ISBM have indicated a willingness to share their experiences with ANZMAC.

### 4. The role of AMJ

The *JM* editorial focuses largely on the elite US journals and the inability of these journals to either lead or follow in a timely way.

My experience is that the prolonged and pedantic, often conservative reviewing processes of the elite journals can inhibit innovation through new ideas and concepts. This means that innovation and the introduction of the new ideas to the marketing discipline will often come from other academic journals. As a relatively young journal, the *AMJ* has the opportunity to play a leading role in innovation and the introduction of new ideas. In doing so it can also play an important role in bridging the theory- practice divide. Examples of international journals that are doing this include *JSR*, *JBR*, *EJM*, *IMM*, and *JBIM*. These journals are taking the lead with innovative editorial policies which pay more attention to the practitioner interface and to innovation. As a result they have achieved a better balance between leading, following and interpreting practice.

Now that most academics have immediate electronic access to all journals, innovative research published in the second tier journals is far more accessible. I predict a change in order of the journals that will be driven by downloads and citations. Increasingly, more sophisticated bibliometrics will be used to provide an indication of the quality of a publication rather than the traditional ranking of journals. There is no reason why *AMJ* could not move up the journal rankings as this new order unfolds. However, this will require a proactive editorial policy that achieves a balance between leading and following business practice. The recent affirmative action of the Australian Business Deans' Council of ranking *AMJ* as a B journal also provides added incentive for *AMJ*.

### References

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