

Chapter 76

Bridging the Academic–Practitioner Divide in Marketing: The Role of Business Schools

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, marketing practice has increased in complexity, becoming more challenging. This situation demands that marketing professionals be better prepared to face the difficulties of the market. Business schools play a key role in training marketing professionals. However, there is a strong divide between the expectations held by marketing professionals and those held in academia. This chapter considers this phenomenon from a theoretical point of view and explores its causes. The author argues that business schools are able to play a key role in bridging theory and practice in marketing. The chapter closes by offering several suggestions for how business schools might increase the relevance of marketing research while reducing the gap between marketing theory and practice. In particular, the chapter offers a set of policies that business schools can implement in order to close this gap.

INTRODUCTION

In 2017, the author of this chapter attended the First Congress of Portuguese Managers, promoted by the Business Administrators Forum¹, an entity that represents Portuguese professional management. This event was attended by almost 300 professional managers (the majority of which were C-level managers). A handful of university representatives also attended the event. These attendees were in charge of promoting executive education services, as the event was a welcome opportunity to network. No scholars were to be found among the participants. The event had 19 speakers. Of these, only one cited data and findings from scholarly research during his presentation.

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In parallel, the author has attended the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing Group annual conference for the last 3 years. The Industrial Marketing and Purchasing Group assembles scholars concerned with developing theoretical concepts and scientific knowledge in the field of business-to-business marketing and purchasing. The Industrial Marketing and Purchasing Group annual conference (organized for the first time in 1984) is the largest conference on marketing in a business-to-business context in the world. The three annual conferences held in 2015, 2016 and 2017 were not attended by any professional managers, with the exception of invited keynote speakers, who were present at the opening day of each conference and delivered a talk featuring their entrepreneurial and business activities.

This is an odd setting for understanding the impact of management research on business practice and evaluating the gaps and intersections between marketing education and practice. In fact, the two examples cited above reveal the extent to which these two worlds remain apart: the world of business research and the world of management practice. The same phenomenon takes place in the marketing setting, where practice and scholarly research can be seen as independent activities.

The issue of rigour versus relevance has stimulated the academic community over the past few years. Rigour has increasingly become the main driver for research in marketing, leading to the decreased relevance of articles published by leading marketing journals (Lehmann, McAlister, & Staelin, 2011). Kumar (2016) argues that rigorous research should go ‘hand-in-hand’ with relevant research to better serve the practitioner community. This is why the Journal of Marketing selects articles with actionable managerial implications and, at the same time, a rigorous approach to research—that is to say, articles that employ clear and sound analytical and conceptual frameworks. Other scholarly publications in the field of marketing have adopted similar editorial policies. This is true of the Journal of Business-to-Business Marketing (Hutt & Walker, 2015), which is concerned with advancing theory and practice in the business marketing arena whilst removing the boundary between scholarly and practical research.

According to Kumar (2017), lack of focus has made the marketing field irrelevant and has reduced the quality of management education and research currently taking place at business schools. In fact, the practical relevance of research is only realized when it moves beyond the academic community and reaches practitioners and decision makers (Kumar, 2017). Recent research shows that the influence of scholarly marketing research is greater when it comes to marketing topics that are important to practice, such as brand management, new product development, marketing strategy, advertising, pricing, sales and channel management (Roberts, Kayande, & Stremersch, 2014).

The way in which marketing is generally taught does not help students to grasp real issues that affect management practice. To overcome this constraint, scholars should be able to bring relevant research into the classroom. This strategy has been adopted at Arizona State University’s marketing department, where corporate partners have provided empirical data and support for scholarly research over the past 15 years (Hutt & Walker, 2015). To successfully conduct this research (which has delivered more than a dozen studies), several activities have had to be critically managed by scholars. These include: (1) demonstrating the value of the research to sponsoring firms; (2) selecting a research theme that resonates with managers’ concerns and that addresses the firms’ key priorities; (3) discussing business challenges prior to undertaking research; (4) delivering on the promise to advance sponsoring firms’ performance, and; (5) treating research as a process of exchange.

Other initiatives have been launched to bridge the academic-practitioner divide in the field of marketing, such as establishing new editorial policies within academic journals (Holbrook, 1995), adopting new approaches to solving marketing decision problems (Lilien, Rangaswamy, Bruggen, & Wierenga, 2002), and improving the quality of marketing management textbooks (Gummesson, 2002). The case

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