



Academic and practitioner theories of marketing

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Abstract. *The relationship between the marketing academy through the conduct of marketing scientific research and marketing practice has been at the centre of a series of debates throughout the 1980s and carried on into the early 1990s. The main outcome of these debates has been a heightened attention to academic and practitioner orientations to marketing research, while conspicuously leaving unexplored how both academics and practitioners theorize upon their observations as well as deal with, evaluate and use marketing theory. An extended example illustrates the divergent orientations to the development and use of marketing theory by academics and practitioners.* **Key Words** ● academic and practitioner orientations ● marketing management ● marketing theory ● theory-in-use

The relationship between academia, the conduct of scientific research, and professional fields of practice has been a subject of continuing debate in most disciplines within the physical and social sciences. Fuelled by a number of societal forces, including shrinking federal support for research, pressures from global competitiveness, the increasing importance of science-based knowledge to the technology and innovation process, and perhaps also a proactive public policy, industry's share of academic research more than doubled from 3.1 percent in 1975 to 6.9 percent in 1995 (NSB, 1996). In the larger scientific community, reactions to these developments have been mixed. Most observers have emphasized the benefits which can be attributed to these partnerships including improved transfer of knowledge and technology, increased relevance of education, and, in the case of practically useful science-derived technology and knowledge, improved competitiveness and economic development. However, others have been less enthusiastic, emphasizing the potential costs of a closer alignment of the domains



in which industry and universities have traditionally operated. Already in the early 1980s, for example, hearings in the US House of Representatives examined two issues within the biomedical sciences (US House of Representatives, 1981): (1) whether university–industry research relationships violated scientific and academic freedom and responsibilities, and (2) whether these relationships best served the interests of the American public.

Debates on the relationship between marketing science and practice

Similar issues regarding the relationship between marketing academia, the conduct of marketing scientific research, and marketing practice, have been at the centre of a series of debates throughout the 1980s and carried on into the early 1990s (e.g. Charnes et al., 1985; Holbrook, 1985; Jacoby, 1985; Brinberg and Hirschman, 1986; AMA, 1988; McTier Anderson, 1994; Armstrong, 1998). Conflicting images and prescriptions of the relationship between scientific theory and research on the one hand and marketing practice on the other prevailed, candidly captured in the exchange between Holbrook (1985) and Jacoby (1985). In this debate, Holbrook (1985) advocated a complete abstention of all kinds of practitioner intervention and mediation in academia, including applied research and consultancy. Subscribing to the belief that scientific development is tied in with an enterprise directed at fundamental understanding per se rather than understanding for use by managers (Kover, 1976; Charnes et al., 1985), Holbrook (1985) argued that academic and practitioner orientations to marketing problems are intrinsically distinct and should for that matter remain separate. Jacoby (1985) replied to Holbrook arguing that, although there are general differences in orientations of academics and practitioners (evident in a quest for basic understanding versus usable knowledge relevant to a particular case), both orientations should be seen as complementary, rather than competitive or mutually exclusive. Apparently sticking to Merton's adage that 'just as inquiries aimed at fundamental knowledge have repeatedly turned up unsuspected applications, so inquiries aimed at application have, though perhaps less often, turned up unsuspected understandings of uniformities in nature and society' (Merton, 1963: 87–8), the stock of marketing knowledge is seen to increase with multiple orientations (academic *and* practitioner) to marketing research (see also Brinberg and Hirschman, 1986).

The net result is that our overall base of knowledge . . . is enriched because each study addresses it from an alternative orientation. The strengths of one orientation (e.g. the relative emphasis on the development of the conceptual model in academic research) compensate for the weaknesses of another orientation (e.g. the lack of emphasis on the conceptual model in practitioner research). (Brinberg and Hirschman, 1986: 168)

For the most part, informed by the exchange between Holbrook (1985) and Jacoby (1985), the conceptualization of the academic and practitioner orientations to



marketing research by Brinberg and Hirschman (1986) has centred here around the question of what the relationship between these orientations should be (on the basis of the different foci that they bring to bear upon a subject) in increasing our theoretical understanding of marketing phenomena. Unfortunately, as the present article argues, such an account is science-centrist, where both (academic and practitioner) orientations to marketing research are to be considered *by academics* so that they coalesce the findings of a nomothetic and global (academic) with an idiographic and localized (practitioner) research approach with the overall objective of gaining a more comprehensive theoretical understanding of the subject in case. As a result, little consideration went into the practitioner perspective, where applied marketing research is undertaken to attain an understanding of the specifics of the local situation or problem in hand in order to identify available courses of action and strategies for dealing with it. Practitioners effectively engage for different, more pragmatic, reasons in marketing research with the aim of building relevant theories-in-use based upon their observations and findings, rather than being concerned with and adding to the theoretical body of knowledge and substantive marketing theory. The aim of the present article is to provide for a conceptualization and analysis of the ways in which both academics and practitioners theorize upon their observations as well as deal with, evaluate and use marketing theory. An extended example is sourced to illustrate the roles of both academics and practitioners in developing and using marketing theory. The purpose of the article's focus on the development and use of theory rather than academic and practitioner orientations to marketing research per se, is twofold: first, any type of research cannot be considered as an end in itself as it is destined to add to either substantive theory or theories-in-use of practitioners (Sutton and Staw, 1995). Second, by focusing on the development and use of theory, the article aims to draw out more clearly the different ways in which academics and practitioners use research and theorize in relation to marketing subjects. Before discussing the example and analysis in greater detail, the next section briefly outlines the general tenets of the academic and practitioner orientations to marketing research, and the different ways in which academics and practitioners develop theory.

Academic and practitioner orientations to theory building and research

The now commonplace distinction in academic and practitioner orientations to marketing research is based upon the premise that, typically, the academic researcher sacrifices a detailed description and analysis of the features of the phenomenon in order to illustrate the relations among the concepts (rather than to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon), while the practitioner focuses on a single problem under study with the purpose of designing strategies and courses of action for dealing with it (e.g. Brinberg and Hirschman, 1986). Academic theories thus aim to capture observed reality in a



general sense, rather than providing a full and comprehensive description of a particular phenomenon (i.e. addressing and explaining virtually every observable and knowable characteristic). In effect, by focusing on some dimensions of a phenomenon (and deliberately ignoring others), academic or substantive theory is seen to abstract and generalize intentionally and, by doing so, to acquire theoretical meaning (see also Astley and Zammuto, 1992).

Marketing practitioners, in contrast, are concerned with short-term actions in response to the specific pressing problems that they are confronted with. The analysis, intelligent reflection and market research that they engage in is inextricably linked to the objective of aiding them in identifying scenarios and available courses of action. Further, alongside marketing managers' experiences of previous actions and their expertise often brought to bear upon marketing problems, such marketing research and analysis will inform and add to their theory-in-use: an account, often implicit in the norms, strategies and assumptions guiding them, of solutions to specific marketing problems, viable actions and task performances (see Schön, 1983). Such a theory-in-use is in the first instance local and conditional, descriptive of and relevant to the specifics of the marketing situation or problem, but may take on a more general dimension when its use is affirmed and reaffirmed through established or proven ways of working and dealing with situations and problems of a similar nature (Argyris and Schön, 1974). It is the contention of this article that the idea that practising marketing managers develop theories-in-use, rather than being concerned with substantive marketing theory, has not been sufficiently acknowledged in prior work. This is even more remarkable, the article suggests, as there have been many clues in prior writings suggesting the prevalence of theories-in-use among practitioners. Work by Armstrong and Schultz (1993) and Zinkhan (1994) for instance has suggested that most of the theory and research published in academic journals is ignored by practising marketing and advertising managers, as these theories are being typically formulated at such a high level of generality that they bear little resemblance to the everyday context in which managers operate and are not readily translated into operational form. As a result, it can be inferred from these works, practising marketing managers turn to alternative sources of knowledge such as market intelligence, managerial expertise and applied marketing research that account for the richness and complexity of phenomena encountered in organizational settings, and also provide them with suggestions for application-specific courses of action.

The preceding sections have outlined the different roles of academics and practitioners in the development and use of marketing theory. First, the distinct reasons of academics and practitioners for engaging with marketing research have been emphasized: the academic enterprise is primarily aimed at establishing and contributing to basic understanding, while practitioners seek usable knowledge relevant to a particular case. Such distinct orientations, the article went on to suggest, have implications for the type of marketing research that is conducted, the inferences that are drawn from gathered data and observations, and the sort of theories that are developed. In regard to the latter, the article pointed to the



presence of theories-in-use within practice; and juxtaposed these theories-in-use to substantive marketing theory. And because of these different types of theories in relation to a marketing subject, practitioners and academics can be expected to hold distinct accounts of the same subject while often using the same or similar terminology. To illustrate, the remainder of this article involves an extended example and analysis of the orientations of both academics and practitioners to the subject of Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) in the field of marketing communications and advertising management, with the purpose of drawing out the inter-relations and conflicts between both communities when studying and theorizing about a particular subject domain. The subject of IMC has been chosen, as it has been widely endorsed by both marketing academics and practitioners along the whole spectrum of industry and commerce in the UK and the US.

An extended example of alternative orientations to theory development

Within academic circles the concept of IMC has, like many other new streams of marketing and advertising research, been embraced in response to developments in marketing and advertising practice (e.g. Caywood et al., 1991). Observing marketing and advertising practitioners cope with the changing challenges of everyday managerial life – induced by the apparent move away from the Fordist model of mass communications into an era characterized by increasing pressures on mass media advertising, heightened competition and increasing fragmentation with more individualistically-oriented consumer audiences (Tedlow, 1990) – provided marketing academics with the grist for the theoretical mill. Once labelled as IMC, marketing academics started to model and examine relationships among these newly-observed marketing phenomena (e.g. direct response marketing, loyalty scheme marketing, electronic commerce, ‘zero-based’ strategy and planning, a cross-fertilization (‘through-the-line’) of communication techniques and media as displacing traditional rigid classifications of mass communications into ‘above-the-line’ and ‘below-the-line’), tying them into the articulated theory base (Nowak and Phelps, 1994).

Ever since its inception, the main academic concern has been around the state of theoretical development on the subject of IMC; in particular the progress towards a formal theory including a specific set of constructs. Among academic commentators, there is little doubt that such a formal theory – ‘a systematically related set of statements including some law-like generalizations that is empirically testable’ (Hunt, 1991: 4) – of IMC has not yet been attained (Nowak and Phelps, 1994; Kitchen, 1999), and that, although theoretical ambiguity might be a necessary feature of theory development in new, emergent streams of marketing and advertising research like IMC, this state of affairs is problematic. That is, the ambiguity in IMC theory (Nowak and Phelps, 1994; Cornelissen and Lock, 2000; Low, 2000) has led to an openness of meaning in theoretical terms and has



effectively increased the range of empirical phenomena to which the theory's conceptual vocabulary refers. This openness of meaning can be seen as having expanded the variety of operationalizations that have been included within the theory's encompassing frame of reference and so has increased the number of research studies that has been construed as tests of the theory (Cornelissen and Lock, 2000). The problem from an academic stance is then that this flexibility of meaning has permitted researchers to apply the concept to qualitatively different types of marketing communications phenomena and processes located at different levels of analysis, in turn increasing the potential number of empirical tests conducted on the theory, but effectively reducing the chance that those tests can amount to a refutation of the theory. In effect, the theoretical concept of IMC is so general in scope, and so ambiguous in meaning (at this stage of its theoretical development), that it is almost unbounded in its potential range of applications (Stewart, 1996), and therefore virtually impossible to refute. It is hardly surprising then that, against this background, most efforts within the academic community have been geared towards a further specification of constructs within IMC theory, notably in the works of Duncan and Everett (1993), Nowak and Phelps (1994), Phelps and Johnson (1996), and Low (2000). These efforts have been particularly aimed at formalizing the theory, making it susceptible to empirical research, and in turn reducing the ambiguity that has surrounded it (Nowak and Phelps, 1994; Phelps and Johnson, 1996; Low, 2000). Closely related with attempts at formalizing IMC theory, a second aim for these academic researchers has been to move away from idiographic sources of evidence (case studies and anecdotes) and to subject the theory to a nomothetic scientific approach and associated methodologies (Duncan and Everett, 1993; Kitchen, 1999). A study by Low (2000), modelling and structurally examining a specific set of IMC constructs (combined planning of communication tools, centralized responsibility for communications, consistency of communication elements) across a wide range of firms and sectors is perhaps the most recent embodiment of this trend.

The approach of practitioners towards IMC is strikingly at odds with the academic enterprise upon the subject as outlined above. While academic theorists and researchers have been continuously working at further formalizing and defining the theoretical concept of IMC, thereby reducing its ambiguity, practitioners on the other hand have a clear stake in upholding IMC's ambivalent legacy (Drobis, 1997). The motive for doing so is that the imprecision and ambiguity regarding what IMC is and how it works offers scope for interpretation, so that practising marketing and advertising managers can project the problems encountered in their organizations into the concept and can thus interpret it as the solution to these pressing problems. Contrary to what a clearly defined, formal (and also highly abstract) theory of IMC would provide, practitioners opt for a more vaguely defined concept, diffuse in meaning, allowing them to shape and define its meaning in the context of their organizational setting.

Linguistic ambiguity is the major factor making possible this use by managers because it gives conceptual terminology great flexibility of application, allowing words to take on new meanings in the context of a different language game. Conceptual utilisation of concepts



implies that managers use their inside knowledge of an organisational setting to interpret and apply general theoretical ideas. (Astley and Zammuto, 1992: 453)

From a practitioner perspective, the real-world situations and problems with which practitioners are confronted are characterized by uncertainty, complexity and instability, and, as unique cases, require a different kind of knowledge (than basic understanding through formal substantive theory) in identifying appropriate courses of action. Here it is stressed that there is no need for knowledge to exhibit universal properties and general principles, rather what is often required is 'suitable' knowledge to enable an understanding of the situation or problem in hand (see Schön, 1983). As such, general ideas and beliefs surrounding the concept of IMC – e.g. increased impact and greater consistency of communications – have in the first instance been 'settled' upon by marketing and advertising practitioners (Kitchen and Schultz, 1999: 30) by specifying them in an equivocal form requiring subsequent interpretation, permitting disparate managers to redefine and interpret the concept in ways relevant to their interests. This further specification of the use and value of IMC within managers' respective organizations involves their theory-in-use; a local and conditional set of principles and assumptions of how marketing communications work in their organizational setting.

The preceding section has emphasized that practitioner theories-in-use of IMC differ in content and meaning from another correlating with the specifics of the situation and organization in hand. The resulting dubious denotation of IMC within practitioner circles has also allowed the concept to take on a more symbolic role within the language-in-use of practitioners. In particular, as Cornelissen and Lock (2000) have already pointed out, IMC and associated terminology ('synergy', 'holism', 'orchestration') has figured in marketing and advertising practitioners language, providing them with a powerful rhetoric of progress. According to Cornelissen and Lock (2000), the superiority of the new rhetoric supplied by IMC appears clear and convincing to any reasonable marketing or advertising practitioner; i.e. from mass communications to one-to-one forms of communications (database-marketing, e-commerce, interactive media – e.g. Schultz, 1996), from functionally organized communication disciplines to more horizontal, cross-functional forms of organization (e.g. Duncan and Moriarty, 1998), and from fragmented to unified and consistent communications (e.g. Duncan and Caywood, 1996). Marketing and advertising practitioners find this rhetoric of progress associated with IMC attractive, because, in combination with the anecdotes and cases of successful implementation, it furnishes them with a powerful line of argumentation. That is, in the context of increasing marketing complexity and increased pressures from organizational stakeholders to use new and improved marketing techniques, the language of IMC provides practising marketing and advertising managers with a vehicle to claim that they are at the forefront of marketing and advertising progress.



Discussion

The above example has illustrated the distinct orientations of academics and practitioners in theorizing about a particular marketing subject. The analysis has drawn out the academic preoccupation with substantive theory building, and its associated requirements of formalizing concepts and the relationships between concepts (at a general level), while practitioners develop local and conditional theories-in-use; a pragmatic set of assumptions regarding solutions to specific marketing problems, viable actions and task performances. It follows that a theory-in-use in which a concept (like IMC) figures is specific to a local situation and/or marketing problem, and such a concept is therefore charged with an ability to convey different meanings to different practitioners (see Astley and Zammuto, 1992). A further observed distinction between the academic and practitioner approaches to theory, as the preceding section has pointed out, is that in academic theory, theoretical constructs and language are expected to have denotative value only (where they function as direct representations of empirical phenomena and where the validity of theoretical propositions is judged solely in terms of their capacity to mirror an external reality that exists independently of scientific observation), while practitioners' theories-in-use consist of concepts, terms and assumptions that are diffuse in meaning and that might be charged with symbolic or rhetorical value within practitioners' language use. The structural differences between the academic and practitioner communities underlying the distinct orientations towards theory and research have been outlined in an earlier section (see also Kover, 1976, Brinberg and Hirschman, 1986). The remainder of this section is concerned with articulating the implications for further research that arise from the conceptual development and analysis presented in this research note.

While this research note is wholly conceptual in laying out the issues surrounding the distinct orientations of academics and practitioners towards theory development and use, it suggests clear ramifications for further academic research. The article puts forward a conceptualization of academic theories versus practitioner theories-in-use, which may be used on a predictive basis to guide, frame and model future research into this area, with efforts particularly geared towards identifying the currency and tenets of both types of theories in relation to general marketing subjects. Besides studies of the nature and extent of both types of theories within the marketing discipline, there is also considerable scope for studies at a more micro level concerning an examination of the genealogy of particular areas of marketing thought (see Brian Jones and Monieson, 1990) and the roles played by practitioners and academics therein. Studies of the latter kind might then also reveal the extent to which theory development within both the academic and practitioner communities occurs separately, or whether there is interplay between them, for instance through sourcing and deriving useful ideas and data from one another (Jacoby, 1985).

On a more general note, the article has argued for a re-appreciation of the distinct role and position of marketing and advertising practitioners within the



discipline of marketing thought. Rather than a view of practitioners as ‘applied social scientists’, who draw discrete elements from the body of academic theory, the article has put forward a view of reflective practitioners (see Schön, 1983) who develop their own theory-in-use of the marketing problems and situations that they face. The appreciation, and the understanding that might follow, of the active role of practitioners as knowledge generators in their own right (albeit of a different kind of knowledge than substantive marketing theory) subsequently requires a ‘greater sensitivity’ on the part of academics ‘to the nature of thought and behaviour among those [i.e. managers] we study’ (Zaltman, 1997: 434). To this end, the article has provided a conceptualization of the general characteristics of theories-in-use that practitioners develop and use, but, ultimately, such understanding may be dependent upon a more active engagement of managers in academic research allowing academics to fully represent managerial thought and behaviour in relation to specific marketing problems (Zaltman, 1997: 424).

Conclusion

The practice and sociology of theorizing is one of the marketing discipline’s most marginal specialties, yet its general tenets have very substantial bearing upon the nature and scope of marketing theory in general. Since the 1980s writings have increasingly attended to the relationship between marketing science and practice (e.g. Charnes et al., 1985; Brinberg and Hirschman, 1986; AMA, 1988; McTier Anderson, 1994; Armstrong, 1998). While much of these debates was rhetorical and directed towards either a critique or legitimation of a particular image of the relationship between science and practice (Holbrook, 1985; Jacoby, 1985), certain ideas about the role of practitioner research in the marketing discipline nevertheless were insinuated into the practice of inquiry (Brinberg and Hirschman, 1986). In particular, prior writings have emphasized the valuable contribution of a practitioner orientation to research as adding to and supplementing basic academic research aimed at fundamental understanding of marketing phenomena (Brinberg and Hirschman, 1986; Charnes et al., 1985). Unfortunately, as the article has argued, such a perspective ignored the development and use of accounts of situations and problems (theories-in-use) by practitioners. The article has therefore conceptualized the general tenets of theories-in-use that practitioners develop and use, juxtaposed to substantive academic theories, and through an extended example has illustrated the divergent orientations to the development and use of marketing theories by academics and practitioners.

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