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Does publish or perish lead to stylish rubbish?

Kaj Storbacka

Faire be no lenger proud of that shall perish,
but that which shal you make immortall, cherish.
Edmund Spenser: Sonnet XXVII

The legacy of basic research

Why are we doing academic research about business-to-business marketing? This is the fundamental question that all of us who are scholars of business and related fields should ask ourselves. To me, it is obvious that we conduct research to help managers do a better job—perhaps not immediately after they have read our individual efforts, but at least over time. If my view is a valid one, it suggests a need to redefine our impact measures, towards assessing the extent to which we influence management practice.

Today, managers are not really interested in what we write about. A recent column in the *New York Times* (Kristof, 2014) supports this claim by arguing that the “most stinging dismissal of a point is to say: ‘That’s academic’”. In other words, to be a scholar is, often, to be irrelevant.” We can react to this sad state of affairs in many ways. We can ignore it, or we can adopt November’s (2004) view that one of the reasons practitioners should ignore our papers is that they are not the intended audience for them. While this reason is robust, it does not negate the premise that the ultimate beneficiaries of our work is—or should be—anyone involved in managerial work?

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To understand why we are (and seemingly accept that we are) increasingly irrelevant, we need to understand how we got to be where we are today. One explanation relates to the ground-breaking work by Bush (1945), who in his report *Science: The Endless Frontier* introduced the idea of distinguishing between 'basic' and 'applied' or 'industrial' research. In the report, he argues for the "perverse law governing research", which is that applied research invariably drives out basic and hence scientists should be left to do what they want. Bush extended his argument by claiming that the results from basic research "trickle down" into empirical reality in a logical sequence: basic research, applied research, development, and operations.

This line of reasoning, aimed at liberating scientists from thinking about practical applications, certainly makes considerable sense in the natural sciences. But I fail to see its application in B2B marketing. I concur with Stokes (1997), whose challenge to Bush's model consists of an argument containing two main points. First, trickle down may not be effective as Bush posited because it neglects the integration of dispersed basic research results. Second, real-world problems can motivate excellent basic science.

As an alternative to Bush's paradigm, Stokes introduced a two-by-two matrix premised on use-inspired research (Figure 1). The matrix has two dimensions and four quadrants. Each dimension asks scholars to consider an important question with respect to their proposed research: How fundamental is the research in terms of the quest for new understanding? And how useful is the research in the real world? The answers to these lead questions inform placement of the research in one of the four quadrants. These are:

1. *Pure basic research*, in which research can be seen as voyages of discovery where there is no need to think about the immediate usefulness of findings. This form of research is exemplified by Niels Bohr, who discovered the structure of the atom.
2. *Pure applied research*, which is driven by the target of practical application and is exemplified by Thomas Edison, the inventor of the light-bulb.
3. *Use-inspired basic research*, which is characterized by a quest for both fundamental understanding and applied use. It is exemplified by Louis Pasteur, renowned for his discoveries of the principles of vaccination and pasteurization.
4. Research that can be labelled '*tinkering*' or 'common man's corner', exemplified by people engaged in genealogy or bird-watching.

Fig.1: Stokes' matrix

Quest for fundamental understanding?	Yes	Pure basic research Bohr's Quadrant	Use-inspired basic research Pasteur's Quadrant
	No	'Tinkering' Birdwatcher's Quadrant	Pure applied research Edison's Quadrant
		No	Yes
		Usefulness considerations?	

My thinking in regard to Stokes's matrix is that the training we receive as researchers inherently drives us towards the practices most applicable for pure basic research and away from those that would have us in the consultant-infested corner of pure applied research. This imperative is further accentuated by the publish-or-perish culture of academia, which emphasizes the need for scholars to publish in a small number of 'quality' journals, where peer reviewers converge content into elegant mathematical modellings (cf., Yadav, 2010). It seems to me that this process has us encrypting our insights into stilted prose, which fosters a culture that "glorifies arcane unintelligibility while disdaining impact and audience" (Kristof, 2014). This culture, in turn, leads to a system of exclusivity and protection against managerial consumption. But if we are to be honest to ourselves, we must also ask: How much of the research that we produce can be placed in the birdwatchers' quadrant?

The dominance of irrelevancy

As the only academic member of the board of the Strategic Account Management Association (SAMA), I constantly probe the borderline between academic (A), business (B), and consulting (C) practice. When I joined SAMA in the mid-1990s, the association had the transparent objective of building itself into an ABC organization and of fostering collaboration amongst A, B and C. Over the years, the A part has slowly declined, albeit revived from time to time through academic panel discussions during the annual conferences.

Through discussions with my fellow board members, all of whom are senior executives in large international organizations such as IBM, Hewlett Packard, Schneider and Siemens, I have come to understand that the reasons why these businesspeople are less and less interested in what academics have to say is twofold (in addition to the pervasive complaints about the stilted language we use). First, they feel that we simplify matters beyond managerial relevance. The academic diagnosis for this state of affairs is 'reductionism' (November, 2004). In order to create a 'researchable' context, we tend to purposefully limit our research efforts in order to find a context where we can control

and understand selected variables. In a strategic account management context, which by nature is complex and systemic, and where there is a need to organize many design elements in a synchronous manner (Storbacka, 2011, 2012), this kind of research easily leads to irrelevant results. Furthermore, it often over-emphasizes variables at the expense of activities. Professor Ian Wilkinson from the University of Sydney raised this issue during a panel discussion on theoretical developments in industrial marketing management at the 2013 IMP conference in Atlanta. He claimed that “academics are interested in variables, whereas managers are interested in causal mechanisms and processes.” The point to take from his comment is that understanding the connections between singular variables (or even a small set of them) is of little interest to managers who run strategic account-management programs. It is important to note, however, that managers do have ‘theories-in-use’ that guide them in their decision making. As Cornelissen (2002) suggests, we need to understand more about how managers use theory in order to provide research they find relevant.

The second reason is even more disturbing. I continuously hear the claim that academics are interested in doing research on issues that managers consider were solved many years ago. The key question, then, becomes one of whether we follow or lead practitioners (Brodie, 2009). What I think we currently do is retrospectively codify the insights of successful managers, without adding anything new that would help them cope with present and future problems. I also hear managers emphasizing that they continue to face a number of very difficult issues, all of which relate to the future of strategic customer relationships. Examples focus on how to successfully manage the impact of digitalization and the internet of things, work in multicultural environments, facilitate increased collaboration in open systems, and drive business-model changes towards solution-business and ‘as-a-service’ models. Instead of these challenges fostering use-inspired research, we seem to have the situation of A-people delegating such future-oriented research to the C-people active in Edison’s quadrant.

De-institutionalizing the separation of basic and applied research

Reibstein et al. (2009) suggest that in order to develop use-inspired research, it would be valuable for marketing academics to engage with practitioners endeavoring to address difficult problems. Bernard Jaworski (2011), who has been active in both the A and C worlds, similarly argues that if academics are to create research that has managerial relevance, they need to gain deeper understandings of the managerial roles that will use the results of that work. However, he closes his article on a pessimistic note: “Given the need to publish, the idea of spending a significant amount of time with managers sounds good in principle but will never be realized. Thus, we will continue to observe the acceleration of nonuse and irrelevance” (p. 223).

One answer to this problem resides in securing better understanding of alternative research methods. In addition to the fact that B2C marketing is over-emphasized at the expense of B2B marketing in academic publishing (Kleinaltenkamp, 2010), there seems to be a divide in method considerations between those of North American and (especially) those of Northern European scholars. The supremacy of quantitative

methods in North America is a legacy of the peer-review system of top journals, which has created a deduction-oriented, reductionist detachment from the real world of managers. This detachment has led not only to what could be described as ‘technical elegance without substance’ but also to confusion between what constitutes correlations and what constitutes cause and effect relationships. Clark et al. (2013) argue that in mainstream marketing, methodological sophistication has taken priority over substantive issues. While the Scandinavian tradition of doing inductive research in collaboration with firms should help remedy this situation, it seems that the frequent over-emphasis in this qualitative research tradition on single-case studies under-emphasizes thorough literature reviews. Bereft of the knowledge that these reviews provide, researchers tend to develop studies and produce papers that re-invent the wheel over and over again, without creating generalizable results.

Another possible way forward, which offers both theoretical and managerial relevance, is to adopt an abduction-oriented research approach that aims at matching deduction and induction (Locke, 2010). Abductive research is based on a non-linear, iterative process of systematic combinations and inference that matches theory with reality (Dubois and Gadde, 2002). This type of research is typically characterized by a mixed research methods and a longitudinal approach. It combines data-gathering with analysis, compares the empirical findings against existing literature-based theory, and uses evidence and experiences gained from a number of interventions. It is also an especially robust form of research for anyone wanting to understand systemic issues featuring many components and complicated connections.

Furthermore, research needs to reconsider the roles of the practitioners. The managers that we study are increasingly well educated and quite knowledgeable about a multitude of managerial theories. We should not only let the managers influence our research agendas, but also actively view them as reflective practitioners (Schön, 1983). Both the researchers and the informants would then be active participants in a social encounter, collaboratively constructing new knowledge (Holstein and Gubrium, 1997).

Publish and perish?

For those of us in academia, many developments in our surrounding reality indicate that the traditional university system is close to being disrupted (see Christensen and Eyring, 2011). Pressure to maximize universities’ main source of income generation—teaching—in the most cost-effective ways available (e.g., online courses and degrees) is mounting. If part of teaching does become an increasingly automated activity, all academics will no longer have the current role description, which divides their time into research, teaching, and service. Instead, we will see specialization, where one set of the academic staff focuses on teaching and the other on research. This development could change the key driving force of academic life. The staff who specialize in teaching will be evaluated on their ability to support learning among students, instead of on their research outputs. As such, there will be fewer people caught up in the publish-or-perish culture and less over-production of research papers by staff “forced” to produce them. With less quantity, we may see better quality.

However, the staff members who concentrate on research will still need to focus, and probably to a greater extent than previously, on income-generating projects to balance university finances. This imperative should consequently facilitate use-inspired research, which should be particularly beneficial for business schools as it is likely to generate research that is more managerially relevant.

In anticipation of these changes occurring, it is important that those of us involved in academic research on business-to-business marketing not passively await them. We echo Webster and Lusch (2013, p. 389) who argue that “the marketing discipline faces an urgent need for rethinking its fundamental purpose, premises and implicit models that have defined marketing for at least the past 50 years”. By finding ways to become more managerially relevant, we are likely to lessen the risk of becoming more marginalized and of facing a reality where we both publish and perish.

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