

Relevant Business Research: A Viewpoint to Help Bridge the Gap between Academia and Practice

Andrew Bryant and Carl Vieregger
Drake University

Subject Area: Marketing, Strategic Management

Article Type: Viewpoint Article

“With a few notable exceptions, scholarly research rarely reaches the worlds of business or policy, and academic journals are neither read nor cited widely beyond the academic community.” – William Glick, Anne Tsui, and Gerald Davis 2018

It has been more than 12 years since Reibstein, Day, and Wind (2009) challenged the marketing academic community to become more relevant to the outside world with the editorial in the *Journal of Marketing* “Is Marketing Academia Losing Its Way?” While this editorial is highly cited, the change it lobbied for still appears distant reality. And precisely 10 years ago, in the *Academy of Management Review*, Sandberg and Tsoukas (2011) sought to address the increasing irrelevancy of management research to practicing managers. In the fields of both marketing and management, as the leading quote indicates, a gap still remains between what academics investigate and what practitioners find relevant. Further, the relevance of business research in general has suffered an additional hit as the overall faith in the social sciences, including business and consumer research, has been shaken by the “replication crisis,” the failure to find similar results in other trials (Camerer, et al. 2018; Meyvis and Van Osselaer 2018). In this viewpoint, we offer our perspective on the ways Marketing and Management scholars can make relevant contributions.

AGENDA FOR BUSINESS RESEARCH

In the sections that follow we lay out practical topics for individual researchers to study and some practices for journals to adopt, with the goal of broadening their impact and readership. Topics include ideas of research valued by practitioners and society.

The Academic Researcher

There is no shortage of broadly relevant topics for researchers in Marketing and Management. Yet, such topics are not necessarily on the forefront of business research. Instead, researchers as a whole tend to focus on abstract topics with “an emphasis on quantity over quality and novelty over replicability” (Jack 2020). We encourage researchers to break away from this mold and engage with practitioners to avoid what has been dubbed “the inward-looking mind-set” (Reibstein, Day, and Wind 2009). Not only does collaboration with practitioners allow researchers to areas of study outside of a laboratory setting, but it exposes the researcher to problems businesses are facing in real time. The only way an academic researcher can produce relevant research is if they know what is relevant.

Further, we argue that researchers should make it a priority to address problems that are relevant to practitioners. Examples of such topics include changing dynamics for global

companies in international markets. The global landscape is complicated and rapidly shifting, so practical advice on how to manage these dynamics is of prime concern. But on a smaller level, researchers can work with local non-profits who may not have the resources of a large firm. Not only could publishing research help other small non-profits around the world, but the work would almost certainly bring value to the local non-profit.

Reibstein, Day, and Wind (2009) argued marketers can address major societal concerns like confidence in the global financial system, health care reform, and reducing obesity to name a few examples. In addition, for many marketing scholars there is a natural extension into public policy. The COVID-19 pandemic has provided an ample set of potential research avenues at the intersection of marketing and public policy. Examples include consumer vaccine hesitancy and how the use of a product (masks) has become emblematic of political and world views. Outside of COVID-19, more long-term issues relating to marketing and public policy include acceptance or denial of the idea of anthropogenic climate change and how this effects consumer behavior.

Recent events also provide a collection of relevant topics for management scholars, including in the areas of sustainability, human capital development, and organizational purpose. Research on sustainability can consider management's role in moving away from mere PR efforts to organizing the business at its core for sustainable success. Management and senior executives can prioritize sustainability concerns and provide focus on the most important matters of ESG for the business. Scholars can also investigate how managers are fostering the success of their most important resource, the employees of the business. This research might develop new theory related to, for example, the coaching and empowering of (remote) teams, and the training and development of individual employees. Similar to building sustainable success and focusing on employees, developing a business with purpose starts with management. Researchers should be studying how an increased emphasis on employee purpose is influencing business purpose, and how that purpose is now much more likely to consider all stakeholders of the organization.

These short lists of marketing and management topics are in no way close to exhaustive of topics a researcher could examine. But the variety does highlight the breadth of relevant business topics available to study.

Marketing and Management Journals

Incentives matter. While authors typically have academic freedom to choose their area of study, journals act as gatekeepers incentivizing some areas of research over others. And typically, incentives for researchers are tied to publishing. Ensuring the structure of the rewards for business researchers is an important piece to this relevant research puzzle (Glick et al. 2018), as are the decisions that the journal editors and reviewers make on topics such as what is and is not publishable. Many top journals will only consider research that is theory driven work on hot topics, which Hoffman (2017) argues can stunt the growth of interesting work in the field. Such a singular focus from all journals in a discipline would do academia a disservice as “research that illuminates important substantive issues should be applauded, even if no new methodologies or theories are advanced” (Reibstein, Day, and Wind 2009, p. 2).

So, while top journals in a discipline may keep their focus on the creation of novel theory, other journals have multiple roles to play in making academic research more relevant to the world. First, the long submission to publication timeline and pay walls of many journals act as a barrier to making research relevant to nonacademic audiences. Efforts should be made to encourage quick but accurate reviews as well as to make articles open access to give practitioners access

to the research. Hoffman (2017) argues that the amount of time it takes academic articles to be reviewed results in “guaranteed irrelevance.” Second, some journals might be better served by measuring impact in other ways in addition to citation counts. Quantifying other dimensions of impact could include the diffusion of the work through society or public policy adoptions. An initial attempt to broaden the scope of measuring impact can be seen in the Financial Times (see Jack 2020). That such dimensions are not clearly quantified now risks the business research succumbing to the bias of the McNamara fallacy, which is “if it cannot be measured, it is not important” (O’Mahony 2017). Third, journals should signal openness to publishing replication studies. Replication is at the heart of science, yet the rewards for running replication studies do not match its integral role. While this may not have a direct effect on making research more relevant to non-academics, it would help in an indirect way by ensuring trust in academic results. If findings are replicated, practitioners will more readily trust that such findings are accurate and robust, making academic findings easier to adopt by practitioners. Finally, journals in Marketing and Management should be open to rigorous descriptive studies that do not necessarily build theory. Marketing and Management journals could borrow from medical journals that take the perspective that “descriptive studies often represent the first scientific toe in the water in new areas of inquiry” (Grimes and Schulz 2002). With such a perspective, building theory may be sufficient but it is not necessary for a contribution.

CONCLUSION

This viewpoint explores the research-relevance gap in marketing and management research and provides several, practical suggestions for both researchers and research journals to address the gap. From the academic’s perspective, bridging the gap begins with the exploration of topics that are practical for marketing and management professionals. Academic journals can also facilitate this exchange by adjusting the incentives for relevant business research.

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