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The marketing missing link

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STRATEGY NOTES

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The great divide between marketing academics and practitioners is intensifying, writes **Bronwyn Higgs**. In her discussion of recent marketing papers from the Australia New Zealand Marketing Academy Conference, she considers the evolution of the industry, both theoretical and practical.

The marketing missing link.

“**M**ay you live in interesting times” is a proverb or curse, often attributed to the ancient Chinese philosopher, Confucius. Although the precise origins and meaning of this proverb are often debated, there can be little doubt that we are currently living through very interesting (i.e. turbulent) times.

Over the past few years, many articles published in the pages of *Marketing* have detailed the changing face of marketing, advertising and media. Even the most cursory scan through recent back issues reveals something of the diversity of subjects covered.

However, until relatively recently, articles dealing with new media could only be found in the trade press and white papers published by commercial media research companies. Few serious academic researchers appeared to be interested in undertaking serious scholarly inquiry into the new media phenomenon. There are signs that this is changing. At a recent marketing conference, a number of papers dealt with the many changes that are occurring within marketing and media.

What is interesting is that many of these subjects represent entirely new concepts to the marketing discipline. Taken collectively, the sheer volume of new concepts introduced suggests that marketing is undergoing unprecedented change, that the discipline is in transition.

Transitional states throw up enormous challenges as well as many unforeseen opportunities. To remain relevant marketing will need new tools and new ways of thinking. Yet, academics and practitioners alike are only just coming to grips with the implications of these changes.

Notions of change and its implications for marketing formed a theme at the recent Australia New Zealand Marketing Academy Con-

ference. Held annually, this conference is the peak avenue for the exchange of ideas among both academic researchers and practitioners.

The 2007 conference was held in Dunedin last December. Its theme was the three Rs – reputation, responsibility and relevance – and it sought to promote a lively discussion on a number of issues and challenges facing the marketing discipline.

More than 500 delegates attended the conference and some 440 papers were presented. While academics certainly formed the more numerous cohort, many practitioners also participated both as presenters and audience members.

Papers presented spanned a diverse range of topics, perspectives and methodologies. Some of the most interesting papers were deeply philosophical; attempting to understand the very nature of marketing, its origins and its future directions.

DEATH OF MARKETING

In a somewhat controversial and highly entertaining paper, Stephen Dann traced the tumultuous life and death of marketing as a discipline. He pointed out that proclamations of the death of marketing have occurred at regular intervals over the past three decades – first in the 1980s, then in the 1990s and again even more recently. In the new millennium, the number of academic luminaries announcing the discipline’s death began to intensify.

“Death notices became increasingly frequent as the posthumous redefinition of the discipline attracted a collection of philosophers, thinkers, vampire hunters and undertakers,” wrote Dann in his quirky style.

Dann, however, is no proponent of the mortality scenario. While he acknowledges that marketing, as a discipline, has had fatal

weaknesses, his paper presented an optimistic future. He outlined the way that definitions of marketing have been repeatedly refined and reworked, allowing the discipline to periodically reinvent itself and maintain its currency.

In other words, Dann showed that the discipline of marketing is very much a work in progress; it is constantly evolving and adapting to the changing external environment.

EVOLUTION

Evolution and adaptation was the subject of a deeply philosophical paper by Richard Varey, editor of the *Australasian Marketing Journal*. Varey tackled a very difficult question: the nature of marketing and its roots, how marketers have understood their discipline and what shape will the transformation take.

Varey argued that marketing has moved beyond its roots in economic theory and towards a form of socio-cultural inquiry. Although this shift has only recently been detected, it represents a profound step along the evolutionary path since it shapes marketing’s worldview. The dominant thinking shapes our interpretation of the world around us. As such, it sets out the foundation for the fundamental concepts, theories, tools, techniques and even language used by members of the discipline.

A change in the dominant thinking inevitably leads to a revised perspective requiring new ways of thinking, seeing and doing. Steeped in economic traditions, marketing thought focused on the private, corporate and capitalist nature of exchange. In the emergent logic of social development, we can detect a new emphasis on responsible consumption, impact of ecology on market-based resource allocation, and social well-being. Varey sees the rise of marketing ethics and social responsibility as recent manifestations of this shift.



His paper pointed out that marketing utilises a language conveniently borrowed from the disciplines that informed it – from economics, physics and the military. “The next project is a ‘logical’ revision of the marketing lexicon – because we do things when we talk. To do the right things, we need a proper vocabulary.”

THE KNOWLEDGE DIFFUSION GAP

Several conference papers touched on the issue of the knowledge gap – a term used to define the gap between academic research and practice. It is a two-way gap in which knowledge filters from practitioners into academic theory and vice versa. The knowledge diffusion gap is not just confined to the marketing discipline. It has been observed within many disciplines – accounting, computer science, health care, the social sciences and even engineering is not immune to this gap.

Considerable research, both locally and internationally, has been conducted to study the way that practitioners use academic research. There are signs that the gap between marketing academics and practitioners is widening.

For example, one Australian study carried out by Forster in 2007 showed that business executives do not read academic business journals. I have not been able to locate any comparable study showing the proportion of academics who regularly read or use practitioner research. Although a glance at the reference lists of academic papers shows that academics tend to consult their peers almost exclusively.

The knowledge diffusion gap can present a major problem during turbulent times. Members of a group need a shared vision if

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they are to confront the challenges presented by an uncertain future.

Marketing literature suggests that the gap is not easy to reconcile. Practitioners and academic researchers tend to have very different worldviews. Academic researchers tend to propose problems regarding their discipline in very different ways. Furthermore, as Varey argued in his paper on evolution, they tend to have very different perspectives on knowledge building. Academic researchers tend to regard their contributions as more scientific and reflective. Practitioners, on the other hand, view their work more as ‘art’.

The knowledge diffusion gap manifests in several distinct ways: a utilisation gap, a relevance gap and a rigour gap. All too often, practitioners treat academic research as irrelevant. Practitioners are most often seeking low risk solutions that can be implemented immediately. The very nature of ‘pure research’ favoured by academic researchers means that is far from being usable.

Any attempt to reconcile the gap requires a more detailed understanding of its dimensions. A paper by John Stanton and Guilherme Pires discussed the knowledge gap in ethnic research and proposed a framework for analysing the gap in greater detail.

The sheer breadth of the subjects covered in the conference’s 440 papers means that it is not possible to provide simple summaries in this short article. For the sake of brevity, a small selection of papers presenting original thinking about the state of our discipline has been covered. Readers are encouraged, however, to scan the full list of original research papers by consulting the links listed at the end of this article.

Now, more than ever, academics and practitioners need to work together to develop the tools, frameworks and concepts needed to understand and leverage the opportunities thrown up by the new marketing paradigm.

The 2008 ANZMAC conference will be held in Sydney later this year. Practitioners, who want to share their ideas about the future directions for marketing, are encouraged to register and particularly to submit papers.

LINKS

ANZMAC, Official Site (archived conference proceedings are available)

ANZMAC, Conference Proceedings, 2007

www.anzmac07.otago.ac.nz/

ANZMAC, 2008, <http://sgsm.com.au/anzmac/> **M**

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