Developing Research on Public Policy and Marketing

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A quarter of a century is a long time, and the past 25 years have offered us ample opportunity to recognize lessons that can be helpful to our future. In reflecting on how our field has developed, I have culled nine particular lessons, which are listed in Table 1, that I believe might be useful in better understanding both where we have been and where we might go in the future. In the brief space available I offer short commentaries on each.

Table 1. Nine Insights on Public Policy and Marketing

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Societal Forces and the Field's Development

All experienced academics realize that research is actually much more than what they read on the pages of journal articles. Instead, the process of research development—particularly in substantive domains such as public policy—involves a variety of exposures that cumulate to influence problem selection and research approaches. Therefore, it is not surprising to observe that the larger social context has played an important role in shaping our development over the past quarter-century.

The social context of the late 1960s and early 1970s was very different from today. Professor Andreasen's piece describes this nicely, so I will not delve much further here. Suffice it to say that at that time there was a much broader interest in issues of business and society. Students and faculty members discussed and debated issues of social responsibility, the value of work as a human enterprise, consumer rights, and so forth. Many of us in business schools came down on the conservative side of these issues, but in contrast to today, we certainly agreed that they *were* issues.

Within this setting, there was an active interest in marketing and society, inquiring into questions of our marketing system's activities and their impacts—both positive and negative—on the social system and its members. My impression is that this was a broader field than is ours today, with academic roots in both economics and institutional marketing (especially physical distribution) and with developing interest into value-laden issues such as fair pricing laws, the treatment of marginalized groups, the social and economic value of advertising, and so forth. The areas we today divide into macromarketing and social marketing were both at work then, though there was furious academic debate on whether broadening the concept of marketing (beyond the for-profit sector) was appropriate for our field. In comparison to today, what was not so evident at that time were advanced statistical and experimental methods, much of the current theory in consumer behavior (such as information processing), and academic focus on consumer protection activities by the government.

Overall, though, it seems to me that the most pertinent difference does involve the breadth of interest across both the marketing field and business academia in general. Today we face a sad situation in which most young academics are receiving no exposure or training in issues of either business and society or public policy. It is a serious concern that the topics of marketing and society have largely disappeared from the mind-set of mainstream marketing academia (I return to this issue subequently).

Research Ebbs and Flows

It is also important to observe that research activity in this area has been anything but smooth and cumulative. It has instead reflected fits and starts, with various researchers moving in and out of the literature. At Notre Dame, my colleague Greg Gundlach and I have been working on a project to track the literature in the field since 1970 (for an early report on this research, see Gundlach and Wilkie 1990). Given publication time lags, our study supports the casual impressions many of us had: from a relatively low level in the early 1970s, the remainder of the decade saw a steady climb in activity, peaking in 1980. At this point the field of marketing began to see a drop in research interest in public policy through the decade of the 1980s, leveling off toward the end, then beginning to climb during the 1990s. Overall, then, an inverted U-curve nicely describes total activity from 1970 to the late 1980s, with a slow but steady increase in activity during the 1990s. With respect to specific topics, our study shows even larger shifts, with some "hot" topics virtually disappearing from the scene.

At this point three conclusions on research activity seem appropriate: First, total interest and participation is growing, and the future looks bright; second, there is still a need for more commitment, more consistency, and more cumulative research traditions; third, the danger of a decline in interest still lurks: It isn't clear that another "1980s decade" does not lie in our future.

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On Depending on the Government

It is startling to realize how dependent our field's development has been on interest and support from key government agencies. Twenty-five years ago, a key impetus came from the Federal Trade Commission's (FTC's) decision to explore the boundaries of its mandate in the area of consumer protection and its ensuing interest in the expertise offered by our field. Many of us became involved, traveling to Washington, advising government and businesses, and undertaking studies. When FTC interests turned to rulemaking in the late 1970s, our efforts moved to incorporate these issues as well.

Then the FTC began to lose its standing (and budget) in Congress, and the deregulatory forces came into power under President Reagan. In the early 1980s, free-market economists entered the FTC in numbers and apparently saw no need for inputs from our field. Thus, hobbled by both budget cuts and lack of current policymakers' interest, research in our area began its long ebb. Recently, under more moderate leadership at the FTC, interest in our field's contributions has been rekindled.

I've learned several lessons during this time. First, the forces that determine government's support for our research are largely independent of (and unresponsive to) our field of endeavor. Therefore, reliance on the government as a sustaining force for us is a dangerous strategy. Second, business seems not to be the answer either: Apart from several long-standing and laudable self-regulatory efforts, interest in the business community in public policy matters seems to be derivative in nature: it is largely absent when the pressure is off and sparks up again when the government becomes interested in a regulatory problem. Third, academics need to confront the issue of their proper purpose, level, and scope of activity. Research in our field should be more than consulting for public policymakers: A substantial proportion of our efforts should be directed toward developing generalizable theories, frameworks, and methodologies for understanding issues related to marketing, society, and regulatory activity.

Impacts from Personal Initiatives

Another surprising insight gained from a look at our recent history is just how significant the impact of a personal initiative can be. Thus our field has its own short roster of heroes and heroines who deserve to be recognized for the impacts they have had. For example, Mary Gardiner Jones began this modern era by pressing for a marketing academic on her staff while serving as an FTC commissioner. Her initiatives set off a decade-long process. She first contacted George Day (then an assistant professor at Stanford), who suggested a doctoral student of his, Murray Silverman. Upon arriving in Washington, Murray discovered that his position on a commissioner's staff meant that he could not interact with bureau personnel on pending matters. Therefore, there was a need for at least one other person from our field to work on these issues. Murray contacted me, and I arrived in mid–1972, as the first consultant within the Bureau of Consumer Protection (BCP; interestingly, the BCP Director then was Robert Pitofsky, now FTC chairman). Shortly thereafter, David Gardner (University of Illinois) arrived as a consultant in the Office of Policy Planning and Evaluation (OPPE), and the three of us began our efforts to employ and instill consumer research at the FTC. As our short-term assignments neared an end, Gardner and I arranged for top researchers to replace us (Harold Kassarjian in BCP, Neil Beckwith in OPPE). They in turn arranged for their successors, and so forth, until a total of some 30 marketing academics had served in these capacities during the 1970s (Jones 1990; Murphy 1990). Many important contributions in our literature, including dissertations, have emerged from these visits.

One problem with naming names is that you might miss some people. Therefore I'll restrict my mentions simply to those in this panel, each of whose personal initiatives have been important in developing this field. In addition to his research in this area, Stephen Greyser, in his capacity as Executive Director of the Marketing Science Institute (MSI), has initiated discussions among researchers, marketers, and public policymakers, leading to research support from such diverse sources as the American Association of Advertising Agencies and the National Science Foundation. MSI's published research and its many mini-conferences did much to foster progress and better understanding.

In addition to his work on disadvantaged consumers, Alan Andreasen initiated a national survey on consumer problems that engendered wide interest in research on consumer satisfaction, and by reporting it in the *Harvard Business Review* he reached key business leaders as well. Also, Andreasen's long commitment to high-quality research and the cause of not-for-profit groups has been a quiet inspiration to many of us in our field.

Turning to Tom Kinnear, newer members of our field might not recognize the enormous gratitude we owe him for having begun, again on his personal initiative, the *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing* at a time (the early 1980s) when there seemed to be little demand for this publication. Morerover, as an able university administrator, Kinnear managed to subsidize this publication under the auspices of the University of Michigan until it was healthy enough to be taken over by the American Marketing Association (AMA). Under its subsequent editors, Patrick Murphy, Michael Mazis, and Debra Scammon, this journal has emerged as the centerpiece of our area.

Michael Mazis, meanwhile, has contributed significant initiatives over an extended period. Among them is the work he stimulated as a policy planner at the FTC, including the influential Consumer Information Task Force in 1979, his research contributions, and *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing* editorship. Mazis also initiated the AMA's Marketing and Society special interest group and organized one of the early conferences in our current series.

Our chairman Paul Bloom has been a consistent stimulator of the field's development, through his activities with MSI, his chairing an early conference in our series, his work with doctoral students, and his creation of a number of sessions such as this one, which are all instrumental to further development of the field.

I do not really wish to persist with names, but I do believe that a note of special thanks also is due to Commissioner Andrew Strenio, who has joined our group in recent years and who worked hard to facilitate its rebirth at the FTC in the 1990s. Also, other FTC commissioners and key staffers have helped to revive research there and have contributed to our conferences and literature.

My lesson here is simple: Getting involved does make a difference. We simply would not have the field we do today if some special people had not stepped forward at the right times.

Research Impediments (1): Marketing Academia

Another observation that is somewhat surprising to me is how few of us, over time, have remained consistently in the public policy zone of research. Instead, almost all of us (myself included) have moved in and out of the area, maintaining some considerable portion of our research activity in consumer behavior, advertising, channels of distribution, or some other area of marketing itself. A surprising number of marketing's best researchers have been contributors to public policy, but only in a sporadic (often one-time) fashion. (A quiz question for newer members: What two leading academics in marketing strategy produced the leading readings book on marketing and society some 25 years ago? You will find the answer in my reference list marked with an asterisk.)

Such part-time efforts are understandable given our primary home in marketing academia. However, I must ask whether this is a positive situation with respect to the field's development. There are several factors to consider in this regard: (1) our strong reliance on the essentially unreliable support and interest from government; (2) the lack of exposure and training to public policy issues in marketing doctoral education; (3) the fact that no school has specialized in marketing and public policy work at the doctoral level, in the manner that Florida has specialized in consumer behavior, Purdue and MIT in marketing science, and so forth (such specialization has had noted impacts in advancing those fields); and (4) the likelihood that recent *Business Week* emphasis on vocational master of business administration (MBA) training will place more pressures to move academics at top MBA schools further away from this area.

Conversely, on many occasions during these 25 years I have detected a latent interest in, and respect for, the issues of our field on the part of many marketing academics. Furthermore, though it is hard to recognize while we are young, I recently have been pleasantly surprised by an increasing realization that academic careers are actually quite long, if a person simply chooses to stay active. Therefore, research on a significant number of topics is actually quite feasible over an extended period of time, and public policy topics certainly can benefit from this opportunity. This panel is a fine example of this very point!

Research Impediments (2): Public Policy Issues

In addition to sociological and institutional analyses, it is important that we recognize that there are also some essentially academic difficulties to be faced in research in this area. For me, this challenge has been nicely captured by the research validity framework proposed by Brinberg and McGrath (1985; for marketing research examples, see also Brinberg and Hirschman 1986). My simplified view of this framework is that there are three domains inherent in any research study: the theoretical, the substantive, and the methodological. If we picture a triangle with each domain at an intersection, the researcher must begin a study at only one of these points—that domain reflecting his or her top-priority question to be answered by the study. The researcher then must develop the study by choosing to move along one of the legs, toward a second domain reflecting a further study aspect of particular significance (e.g., that it be realistic, that it be theoretically clean, that it be rigorously carried out). Then, only after reaching appropriate reconciliations on these two domains can the researcher move across the triangle to the third domain. At this point, prospects for a strong representation of this third domain are bleak, as its essential demands will have been sacrificed in order to achieve the demands of the first and second domains.

Having experienced this very problem in some of my own work and having observed it in the course of reading and reviewing many other studies in our area, by now I am convinced that this is an excellent representation of the difficulties we face. The primary difficulty is that theories seem to be inherently confounded in the complex real world of public policy issues. If we start with the substantive domain, then we will likely not find a clean mapping onto a single theory. Conversely, if we start with a single theory, we are likely to oversimplify the realities of the policy problem.

Two lessons emerge from this analysis. First, if we are to be relevant and significant for public policy, the substantive domain *must* be represented strongly in much of our research. This brings with it a risk that either theory or methodology will be weaker in these studies. This, however, is unacceptable for our academic field. Therefore, it seems that the only alternative for us is programmatic research such that, over time, each domain can be explored appropriately in our work. The downside is that this could require more time (and research support) than many marketing academics wish to invest.

An Infrastructure Emerges

Against the limiting prognoses of the last several points, this one is extremely positive. It has been heartening to watch how our academic field has begun to build a solid basis for itself. The rotating research positions at the FTC, together with the staunch support of MSI, the Association for Consumer Research (ACR), and the AMA, were key factors in supporting our work during the 1970s. As one indicator of our success, by the late 1970s FTC's own budget for consumer research, under the control of Ken Bernhardt, was some $1 million. However, this supporting structure largely crumbled when the FTC began its budgetary and organizational retreat from support of our area in the 1980s.

At this point, Professor Kinnear's development of the *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing* served to offer a continuing outlet for such research (and in this sense can be seen possibly to have saved our field). As the journal got stronger, interest in the area continued. At Notre Dame, Pat Murphy and I decided to convene a special symposium to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the FTC. This 1989 event, which brought together the academic researchers who had served at the FTC and some key past and present FTC officials, was a smashing success. Its contents are captured in a book (Murphy and Wilkie 1990) that is intended as a resource for those wishing to work in this field. The spirited interaction at that symposium led to participants agreeing that this is something we should do on a more frequent basis and, thanks to the initiatives of others, led eventually to the establishment of our annual conference held each May (current plans call for the 1999 Marketing and Public Policy Conference to be held at Notre Dame for a tenth anniversary celebration).

Finally, our field's infrastructure has been strengthened further by the recent development of the Marketing and Society special interest group within the AMA, providing us with a formal organizational structure around which to build. Under its able early leaders, the special interest group is strong and active, sponsoring special workshops at AMA conferences, sponsoring our annual conference, and publishing a newsletter to foster communication and new activity.

Taken altogether, we have now seen our field develop its own journal, its own conference, and its own association, all working to offer a venue and support for academics to interact, learn, and publish research on topics in our field. In this respect, we have certainly come a long way!

Marginalization Threatens

On the downside of our field's development is a rising concern that the gap between us and mainstream marketing could be increasing. We have noted already some of the symptoms. Probably the most disturbing is that most doctoral students today are receiving little or no education on our topics. I do not know whether this is being accompanied by a negative word of mouth about these topics. (Fortunately, however, I believe that we have avoided being captured by any particular political philosophy: conservatives, liberals, and moderates are all welcomed in our sessions and journal.)

Although removal from the mainstream might not affect us personally, I believe it is serious because our topics and points of view are important for the field of marketing academia to consider. As I indicate previously, there have been numerous occasions in which I have noted a latent interest in and respect for our issues among a broad range of marketing academics. I do not believe that the marginalization threat stems from deliberate efforts, but simply from the need to allocate time and attention to matters of perceived priorities. As the emphasis on MBA and executive training becomes incredibly strong at leading research schools, moreover, we can expect for these difficulties to increase.

My suggestion, therefore, is that we make serious and strong efforts to maintain marketing and public policy issues and perspectives in the mainstream of marketing academia. This means that we would strive to produce some work for *Journal of Marketing, Journal of Marketing Research, Journal of Consumer Research,* and *Marketing Science* as well as other mainstream publications. We would support Professor Jerry Wind's "Value of Marketing" program at Wharton, and we would increase our participation in MSI's research programs. It means that we would propose special sessions at AMA, ACR, Marketing Science, and other major conferences. Finally, it means that we would make efforts to reach out to doctoral students at this critical time of their educational development.

New Challenges and New Vistas

One striking aspect of our field is how important deliberate action has been in its development. In this spirit I offer some questions that I have about where we might head from here. How large a field should we be, and what level of cohesion should we seek? What sort of relationship should we have with consumer groups such as Consumer Federation of America or Consumers Union? What sort of relationship should we have with academic groups, such as the American Council on Consumer Interests, the Society for Consumer Psychology, macromarketers, and social marketers? What role, if any, should we seek to serve for public policymakers, marketing managers, or industry associations? To what extent should our research be "problem-driven"; to what extent normative? Given that we now can take on any of a number of shapes, it is good to ask seriously what we wish to become.

Turning to research substance, in case the previous points have not raised enough issues for further consideration, we should be pleased to see that the changes in the world are bringing larger and more complex issues before us for further research. Among these topics are the impacts of *globalization* on marketers, consumers, employees, investors, citizens, and regulators. Also, the development of *database marketing* offers challenges yet to be explicated and analyzed fully. Furthermore, the *technological implications* of the World Wide Web are potentially immense and deserve attention. Finally, future *antitrust policies* well could benefit were insights from our field to be offered in depth. The FTC held an interesting set of hearings on some of these issues in Fall 1995. (Transcripts are available on the FTC's Home Page [FTC 1996].)

A Concluding Comment

Although I have ended with challenges and questions for the future, these do not fully reflect my current thoughts about our field or its accomplishments. It was an exciting journey the first time through, and it has been a pleasure to revisit it again. I hope that it is clear that I have much appreciated the chance to have participated in this area at all: It is inherently an interesting and important sphere of activity, rewarding both personally and professionally. I am pleased to have been able to play a part in our journey to this point, and I look forward to participating in our continued progress in the future.

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