

## **Needed: A Larger Sense of Marketing and Scholarship**

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### ***Has a Larger Sense of Marketing Gone Missing?***

**A** broad unrest appears to be surfacing about our field's direction and practices, and I appreciate this opportunity to share my observations. In recent years, Elizabeth Moore and I have been pursuing the question, What is marketing, anyway? (Wilkie and Moore 1999,2003).<sup>2</sup> Our findings show that the field has changed sharply over time, and some considerable knowledge has been left behind during the general advance. However, this has now gone too far. Some of today's views of marketing scholarship are overly constraining, especially regarding broader conceptualizations of marketing. To illustrate, consider the new official statement of our field.

#### ***Limitations of the AMA's New Definition of Marketing***

The AMA has recently defined the term "marketing" as follows:

Marketing is an organizational function and a set of processes for creating, communicating, and delivering value to customers and for managing customer relationships in ways that benefit the organization and its stakeholders.

I appreciate the professional appeal in capturing a marketing manager's role. However, this definition's sole focus is on marketing within an individual organization, which limits scholarship.

*Dangers in adopting goals of all organizations engaged in marketing.* In my view, the greatest risk of equating all marketing with managerial decisions within organizations is that their goals are being adopted by marketing thinkers without any external appraisal. This leads to something akin to blanket approval of the reality of the marketing world's undertakings. When identifying ourselves with these goals and actions, whose perceived interests are being served, and does this matter? A brief consideration of egregious examples found in political campaigning, lobbying, fraud, bid rigging, energy gouging, channel stuffing, and so forth, alerts us that many organizations are highly imperfect entities with mixed motivations. Furthermore, in most organizations, people other than marketers are setting priorities. Organizational marketing is important, but it should not be taken to represent all of marketing thought.

*Limitations in addressing the competitive nature of our marketing system.* The sole focus on a firm also leaves us without strong concepts to assess multiple firms engaged in simultaneous marketing activity. For example, when 8 or 12 firms compete in a market, how do we assess the "marketing" that is occurring on all fronts? Inefficiencies would be natural, but they are beyond the managerial purview itself. Is this why our field has not had more of an impact on antitrust enforcement?

*Limitations in addressing the marketing system's interactions with consumers.* One major task for every consumer is allocating his or her budget for purchases. If we ask, "How well do marketers help consumers with their budget and effort allocation decisions?" the answer is, "Very poorly." In the aggregate, all marketers simply propose too much consumption for each consumer. The system acts as if consumer resources and wants are infinite and insatiable: Every product and service category is advocated as worthy of consumption for virtually everyone. Furthermore, within each category, marketers are offering consumers highly conflicting advice as to which alternative to select. To cope, consumers must ignore or resist most marketing programs and respond positively to only a relative few.<sup>3</sup> These characteristics surely make it difficult to equate each marketer's best interest with each consumer's best interest. (I stress that these are not criticisms but rather characteristics of the marketing system that are not evident from the managerial perspective on marketing.)

*Limitations in addressing major societal and public policy issues.* There are two good examples of this issue: (1) Childhood obesity is a growing problem in the United States. Is a single-firm focus for marketing the most effective way to address this? (2) Direct-to-consumer advertising of prescription drugs is actually a public policy experiment in the United States. How helpful have marketing academics been in devising or evaluating this policy?<sup>4</sup> My point is simple: There are issues in our world that are larger than the problems of a single organization.

*Removing research opportunities from many marketing academics who would like to pursue these broader issues.* Given the AMA's definition, how are academic marketing thought leaders being prepared to address the role of marketing in society? To examine this, a survey of AMA-Sheth Doctoral Consortium participants was conducted (Wilkie and Moore 1997). The results show a striking gap between personal interest levels and training that is provided: Two-thirds of the doctoral candidates reported having a personal interest in learning about marketing and society, but fewer than one in ten had taken even a single course on the subject, and their self-ratings of expertise were low. Doctoral programs sorely need to reconsider this issue.

It is troubling to realize that knowledge does not necessarily accumulate in a field; knowledge can disappear over time if it is not actively transmitted (e.g., Wilkie 1981). One responsibility of academia is to place a field of study into proper perspective. I believe that the concept of an aggregate marketing system (Wilkie and Moore 1999) should occupy a central position in marketing scholarship. However, this will not happen unless current scholars accept that important knowledge is being lost from the active body of marketing thought. As research specialization has proceeded (with good reason), this risk has increased. Knowledge outside of a person's specialty may first be viewed as noninstrumental, then as nonessential, then as nonimportant, and finally as nonexistent. My particular concern is for the subsequent generations of scholars (both today's and the future's doctoral students) who may not gain enough background to even realize that a choice is available to them.

*Understating the scope and importance of marketing.* Finally, a key finding in the "Marketing's Contributions" (Wilkie and Moore 1999) article flowed from a system illustration that included 75 marketing-related activities. Of these 75 marketing system activities, we found that marketing managers control only approximately 30, or fewer than half. They influence most other activities, but they are not in control of them; furthermore, these activities are not what is typically considered marketing according to the current view of the field. To me, this understates the importance of marketing and calls for a perspective that is beyond the controllable decisions of marketing managers; such a perspective must reflect inclusive appreciation of organizational operations and of governments' roles in the facilitation of marketing system operations. In brief, we need a larger conception of marketing.

## ***Is Marketing Academia Losing Its Heart?***

A spontaneous episode at the 2005 AMA Winter Marketing Educators' Conference sent a signal about the state of our field today. Kent Monroe was named the 2005 Distinguished Marketing Educator (a fitting honor), and I was one of the people asked to speak at his reception. Midway through my remarks, I detoured from my outline and mused, "By the way, there seems to be a meanness creeping into our field, and we really don't need this." Much to my surprise, applause for this sentiment spread across the 100–150 people in the room. A chord had inadvertently been struck that resonates with many marketing academics today. This little vignette suggests a high level of emotion behind the scenes of our professional lives. Virtually everything in print is about facts, theories, methods, and applications. Behind this, however, is the living reality of our academic lives and pursuits. Collectively, we are the College of Marketing. Individually, we are talented people who have each invested heavily to be in a position to contribute to knowledge. As the vignette suggests, overt attention needs to be paid to the quality of life in our field today. It is especially painful to talk with people who, as young, aspiring scholars in the field, are now out of research academia (or virtually so), embittered by their experiences and still suffering from the blows to their youthful enthusiasm, idealism, and self-confidence.<sup>5</sup> Are there steps to improve this situation? I think so.

Briefly, I assert that it is time for a new marketing academic summit, perhaps as a task force on thought development, with the goal of enhancing the participation in and quality of marketing scholarship. In addition to addressing what should be studied and how, I suggest that serious attention should be given to how research quality of life can be improved. For example, informal discussions with senior academics suggest that journal acceptance rates currently hover at approximately 10%, and tenure achievement for first positions at research schools are 25% or less (recall that this is the outlook for presumably the best-trained, most talented people entering our field). It strikes me that these figures reflect a pall on the pursuit of knowledge (at least to the extent that it is internally motivated) and help engender the cynicism and meanness that has entered our college. A key goal for this summit should be to strive to improve these rates and to engender a more positive context for our work.<sup>6</sup> Specific topics I believe deserve to be addressed include the following:

- The unrealistic expectations of many universities today in context of a six-year tenure time frame and an overemphasis on "A" journals.<sup>7</sup>
- The crucial role of a few key journals for the field—a positive or negative in the face of continuing growth and fragmentation?
- The sometimes destructive (and delaying) behaviors of reviewers, coupled with overreaching intrusions into freedoms of thought, theory, and method.<sup>8</sup>
- Current strengths, weaknesses, and biases in doctoral education, together with exploration of postdoctoral opportunities.
- Opportunities and problems presented by the twin forces of globalization and the Internet, including the explosion of business education around the world and the coming infusion of thousands of new marketing academics.

In closing, let me say that academic marketing has wonderful potentials, and it deserves our care, consideration, and cultivation.

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### Footnotes

2. Copies of our articles “Marketing’s Contributions to Society” (Wilkie and Moore 1999) and “Scholarly Research in Marketing: Exploring the ‘4 Eras’ of Thought Development” (Wilkie and Moore 2003) can be downloaded at <http://web2.business.nd.edu/Faculty/wilkie.html>.
3. For extended discussion, see Wilkie (1994, Ch. 2).
4. For an initiative in this area, see Farris and Wilkie (2005).
5. I have developed further thoughts along these lines in an invited *Journal of Marketing* essay titled “On Books and Scholarship: Reflections of a Marketing Academic” (Wilkie 2002). It can be downloaded at <http://web2.business.nd.edu/Faculty/wilkie.html>.
6. For an earlier report, see AMA Task Force on the Development of Marketing Thought (1988).
7. Note that I would personally advocate extending the tenure period to nine or ten years (with options for a person to go up early) and would require that papers actually be read and evaluated for their quality and contribution. It would be difficult for the marketing field alone to gain such change, but our key institutions (i.e., AMA, Association for Consumer Research, and Institute for Operations Research and Management Sciences) could surely approach other areas of business to explore a unified improvement for business schools. I would not leave this up to the deans; they have other agendas beyond scholarship to pursue.
8. I wanted to use the subheading “Reviewers and Rigor ... Mortis?” but I could not work it in because of space constraints.

### References

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