

A NOTE ON STARTING AND BUILDING A RESEARCH AGENDA

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ABSTRACT

Starting and building a successful research agenda is extremely challenging for most new marketing academics given the number of pressures they face upon assuming an assistant professor position. Based on recommendations from the literature and the authors' own personal observations and experiences, several suggestions and guidelines are presented here that may help new marketing faculty members establish the beginning of a strong research record.

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Marketing academics just embarking on a career often face difficulties with getting their research agendas “off the ground.” Although they may be entering the academy with their dissertation behind them, freshly minted doctorates are confronted with a new and challenging environment. As if moving, settling in, and becoming acclimated to a different environment were not enough, new faculty are also expected to meet the scholarly demands of their new institution, maintain effective performance in the classroom, fulfill institutional and professional service activities, and build a new network of colleagues. Balancing these substantial responsibilities is clearly a primary challenge facing new faculty.

However, after having experienced the first few years of a “life-after-dissertation,” many academics quickly realize that this balancing act is only part of the story. The many years invested in a dissertation now must be translated into publications. Having a solid dissertation and well-developed research agenda is a good begin-

ning. Unfortunately, too often dissertations remain unpublished, related working papers lay dormant, and research agendas remain unfilled. Hence, converging on this and related research is a major challenge to be met. This includes getting the dissertation into a publishable format, completing other manuscripts in the “pipe,” selecting appropriate publication outlets, and actually getting the work out under review. Perhaps even more difficult is keeping the research stream going for many years to come.

This note provides some insights from the literature as well as observations of common problems and difficulties we have witnessed in others and personally faced during the first several years as a new faculty member. We also provide several important ideas to consider in getting the research agenda off and running. First, the starting point for many research agendas is the dissertation, and several areas to consider are discussed. These include topic breadth and interest, cooperation with the advisor, and the conceptual linkage to related areas of research. Next, a number of issues are discussed regarding keeping the research agenda going. This includes understanding general threats to

research productivity, building collaborative relationships, “learning” how to publish, and understanding the research pressure of a tenure-track faculty member.

STARTING OUT

The Dissertation

Whicker (1993) recommends avoiding the development of a very narrow research topic (referred to as the scalpel model). We agree, having observed that the dissertation topic needs to be of sufficient breath as to lead to multiple publications. Given that the first few years as a new assistant professor are so demanding, it is difficult to begin new large-scale research projects. Thus, publishing more than one article from the dissertation puts new faculty members at a distinct advantage. In addition, because so much time and effort are dedicated to the dissertation, the new Ph.D. is often an expert in the area. This often makes publishing articles in the area much less burdensome. According to Fechter (1999), if your research is linked to a very narrow area, you may be limiting yourself in terms of ability to publish multiple items from your dissertation and in your ability to continue to publish related research in the future. In addition, if your area of specialization is too narrow you may also be limiting your ability to move to other institutions in the future.

Interest in the dissertation topic is also of utmost importance. Beatty (1999) strongly recommends that students pick something they enjoy, something they believe in, something fun. She urges students to think about questions such as “What can I bring to the topic? Is it interesting to me? Do I believe in it?” (Beatty 1999). Lutz (1990) also suggests that, when choosing a topic, a student should look within him- or herself. “A topic isn’t hot for you unless you decide it is,” (p. ii). Lutz goes on to say that it is likely that the experts in our field develop their knowledge by becoming completely committed and immersed in their respective areas. This would be a difficult task if a person does not enjoy the topic area.

Connection to the “big picture” is also essential. We have observed that when the topic is logically connected to other related, important topics and there is overlap in substantive areas, extending one’s research agenda is much easier. Beatty (1999) recommends that marketing academics eventually develop about three main research streams that merge and complement each other.

Obviously the topic must also be important. It is writer’s job to convince readers/reviewers that we do not know everything about the specific area. Lutz (1990) suggests that researchers “test market” their ideas with peers to ensure that research on the topic is indeed needed and that the idea is exciting to others. He recommends obtaining feedback by telling others about the idea and showing them the research model before collecting data (this also applies to other research, in addition to the dissertation).

We also feel that cooperation with dissertation chair is extremely vital, both during the dissertation process, and after completion when working on publications. Building and maintaining a positive relationship with your dissertation chair and continuing this after graduation it is helpful to new academics in completing and submitting manuscripts in a timely manner. Further, maintaining precise scheduling and deadlines with the dissertation chair and adhering to these is imperative. Scheduling meetings (in person or via phone and/or e-mail) and creating an agenda for each meeting (this also applies to other co-authors) are extremely beneficial actions. In addition, knowing what needs to be accomplished before the meeting and what should be addressed at the meeting are also very useful tactics. Finally, recording spontaneous ideas that emerge in between sessions that may be discussed at the next meeting is highly constructive.

We have also seen that having a good relationship with your chair is very advantageous with regards to networking. Beatty (1999) suggests that Ph.D. students, as well as new faculty, ask their chairpersons to introduce them to oth-

ers in field who may serve as future co-authors, peer reviewers, or mentors. She contends that even the most highly regarded scholars in the field are frequently willing to assist new academics.

Publishing as a Doctoral Student

It is our opinion that one of the most critical aspects to hitting the ground running is for doctoral students to be actively involved in research and publication activity early in their program. This research activity ideally would be related to the dissertation, but does not absolutely have to be lockstep with the dissertation topic. In fact, some variance in research interests is healthy for doctoral students and new faculty.

Even though doing additional research is extremely difficult for many doctoral students, particularly given the demands of most doctoral programs, it nevertheless appears to be critical to launching a successful research agenda. This is so for many reasons, one of which is the relatively “short” tenure clock most new marketing academics encounter (Wilson 2001).

Key to establishing a research presence early is building close working relationships with faculty with similar research interests. We suggest being proactive by approaching key faculty with ideas. It is very useful for doctoral students to indicate a willingness to be involved with a faculty member’s research activities, to be enthusiastic, and to be willing to continue with a project once the opportunity surfaces. A good place to begin building collaborative relationships with faculty is by writing conference papers. Over time this can lead to more papers and ideas, as well as publishable research.

KEEPING THE RESEARCH GOING

Threats to Career Productivity

Much has been written about threats to career productivity in the marketing academic area. A useful framework to explore these pitfalls is to

view these influences as falling into one of three categories: “bombs,” “burnouts,” and “bigamists” (AMA Task Force 1988). Collectively these influences may result in limited leadership (seasoned marketing academics assisting green scholars), limited programmatic research, limited credibility with external constituencies, and limited aspirations among marketing scholars (AMA Task Force 1988). Here, we focus on bombs and burnouts, as these are more likely to occur earlier in the career of a marketing academic.

Bombs are academics that “fall from great heights to great depths,” resulting in early failure as a productive scholar. This is due to a number of factors, including weak doctoral training, entering the job market too soon or accepting a job before completing the dissertation, assuming heavy teaching assignments too soon or doing too much consulting and other non-research activities, or facing accelerated tenure clocks. Interestingly, most of these issues identified by the AMA Task force (1988) can be minimized, or avoided outright, by new scholars by (1) completing the dissertation in a timely manner, and subsequently (2) focusing on research during the first years out of school. Research in other disciplines has also shown that mentoring has advantages for new faculty in terms of long-term research productivity as well (Williams and Blackburn 1988).

Burnouts are academics, who after a period of productivity, “overheat” and breakdown. Research has shown that one out of every eleven associate/full professors in marketing may be burned out (Singh and Bush 1998). While many academics successfully emerge from the tenure process, they find that they are in a state of complete physical and emotional exhaustion. A number of factors contribute to burnout, including the journal review process itself, a focus on textbook writing, growing frustration over minimal impact, becoming obsolete, limited funding and collegial encouragement for research, misplaced rewards, and changing personal priorities.

Additional factors have been identified by others, including psychological burnout, work-family conflict, lack of rewards commensurate with publishing in the top-tier journals, and weak doctoral training (Singh and Bush 1998). In fact, doctoral training has recently been the focus of criticism, as statistics increasingly show dissatisfaction among doctoral students (across all disciplines) regarding the organization of their doctoral program and preparation for research careers (Magner 2000). As a result, in many disciplines the best and brightest are leaving for careers in industry (Magner 2000). Other consequences of burnout include a negative attitude toward research, less time spent on scholarly endeavors, lower job satisfaction, and higher turnover (Singh and Bush 1998).

Again, while many of these forces may be inevitable for many scholars, it is our observation that a calculated, programmatic stream of research that begins early in doctoral education may provide a buffer against many of these forces. Others have also noted the advantages of establishing collaborative relationships early in one's career as reducing burnout. Institutional efforts to grant more sabbatical leave, to provide better support for professional development, to hold regular departmental brown-bag workshops, and to employ flexible teaching schedules have also been found to be useful (Singh and Bush 1998). There are comprehensive resources that address these and many other issues associated with research productivity. See, for example, *The Full-Time Faculty Handbook* (Bianco-Mathis and Chalofsky 1999).

Research Collaboration

One area that appears to be critical to keeping the research fires burning is ongoing research collaboration. Building strong collaborative relationships has many benefits: sharing the workload of a major research project, providing critical and different perspectives on the same phenomena, providing motivation for future re-

search, and producing an overall better research product. In fact, lack of collaborative effort in research has been found to be associated with research burnout (Singh and Bush 1998).

We advise starting collaboration by looking for synergies with others. It is important to identify strong co-authors with complementary skills and to find an agreeable style of working with people. Co-authors should also clearly designate expectations. Beatty (1999) urges faculty members to quickly eliminate those co-authors who do not fulfill these expectations. Some working relationships can be highly specialized. In a manner akin to an assembly line, one person collects data, one person does the analysis, and one person writes the manuscript.

Collaborating with colleagues at one's respective institution is very productive and convenient. Although each person's interests will probably not be exact, overlaps can oftentimes be found. An exciting research environment can be created if new scholars attempt to capitalize on synergies and inspire and motivate each other. Collaboration is not limited to those at the same institution, but should include colleagues at other institutions as well. We feel that new scholars should attend conferences regularly to meet people and look for other faculty members who might have common interests.

Another good idea is to solicit assistance, such as guidance in developing research ideas, from senior faculty. Malone (1999) urges new faculty to ask a colleague with similar research interests to review a draft of a paper before submitting it. At conferences, making an effort to network with colleagues from other universities and volunteering to chair conference sessions will help establish ties with others in the field. Fechter (1999) recommends seeking outside sources for professional advice, whereas Beatty (1999) suggests asking for interaction from experts in the area and continually searching for your next collaborator.

Publishing Tips and Advice

Equally important to the above issues is the realization that most new Ph.D.'s are relatively inexperienced at publishing. Hence, while "on the job" training regarding publishing is often the *modus operandi* for new marketing faculty, new scholars should be aware that the literature is replete with wisdom and guidance from those who have learned how to be successful at publishing.

While we do not provide a comprehensive list of tips and advice regarding getting a manuscript published, we do provide a short overview of some thoughts on this topic that have appeared over the years in the literature. We focus discussion on the major steps that an author goes through in publishing, including idea generation, research design, targeting journals, writing the manuscript, and submitting and revising the manuscript. Each of these is now briefly discussed.

Idea Generation, Research Design and Targeting. From the beginning, having a clear focus regarding the intended contribution of the research is imperative. This area has been identified too often as the basis for fatal flaws. Lutz (1990) notes that fatal flaws are often of the form where the stated research problem is not judged to be innovative, interesting, or important. This may result from a lack of clear focus regarding the contribution of the research

Lutz (1990) also states that scholars should think more about the audience of the research. All studies should be designed with a constituency in mind, whether it is other academics, practitioners, managers, or policy officials. To this end, it is often beneficial to "test market" the research prior to executing it, seeking insight and advice from peers during the idea-generation and research-design stages (Lutz 1990).

The research should also be creative, unique, and offer a fresh perspective – originality counts (Beatty et al. 1992). When writing the manuscript, Beatty (1999) urges researchers to always

ask what the contribution is. Questions such as "What can I tell my audience that they do not already know? What is the 'neat twist' here?" should be posed (Beatty 1999). It is important to build contribution. Authors should avoid understating what is previously known on the topic and remember that the present state of knowledge is the benchmark for measuring the contribution of the paper.

Finally, authors must target the desired journal from the study design phase. They should also aim as high as feasible with regards to publication outlet, but should never submit a manuscript to a specific journal just to get feedback (Beatty 1999). "Special issues" in journals present unique opportunities as research outlets. Further, special issues often have strict deadlines that will keep junior faculty motivated and on track.

Writing. Communicating clearly is the most important goal. Authors are well-advised to give the reviewers a reason to read the manuscript in the first three paragraphs. Seriously pondering such questions as "What do we already know and where does this lead?" and "What does this study bring to the area?" will help. Authors should also consider stating the intended contribution of the work in terms of whether it identifies how theory applies to the marketplace, extends theory, investigates important moderator or mediator variables, or identifies boundary conditions for theory (Varadarajan 1996). Further, it is helpful if there is a practical hook that clearly relates the findings to marketing practice.

Carelessness in writing and presentation not only make the manuscript difficult to read and interpret, but perhaps more importantly, may create a negative halo effect on the reviewers' comments and opinions of the research as a whole (Beatty et al. 1992; Lutz 1990). In fact, the most important communication barrier to publishing is the quality of the exposition of the manuscript (Lutz 1990). Communication barriers also occur at the global level when the manuscript does not flow well, or when it is confusing and not persuasive (Lutz 1990). Therefore, an

author must do an excellent job in crafting a manuscript, viewing it a work of art, carefully pieced together and planned.

According to a study by Beatty et al. (1992), the most important criteria in the review process are the significance of the contribution and the conceptual rigor of the paper. In this study, reviewers often talked about the need for the application of sound theory, with poor theory being a leading cause of rejection. Further, while the length-to-contribution ratio is an important consideration (Lutz 1990), authors should provide a coherent synthesis of the extant research on the topic (Varadarajan 1996). Further, the study must be credible and trustworthy. Claims must be believable. Authors should also acknowledge any disadvantages of the research and turn them into advantages (i.e., "Here's what we can learn . . .").

Submitting. According to Lutz (1990), all manuscripts should be peer-reviewed before being submitted. He recommends asking two to four trusted and respected colleagues to critically review a paper before submitting it. Effective peer reviews should inspire critical thoughts about the manuscript or motivate considerable revisions. It may be advantageous to consider peer reviewers who are less familiar with the topic, as these colleagues often have great insights (Beatty 1999). When asking your colleagues to read the manuscript, clearly request that they provide reasons they would reject it. Then arguments can be constructed, in advance of submitting the paper, to counter these reasons.

Revising. When a manuscript comes back with a request for a major revision, all is not lost. Making concerted efforts to turn the revision around as quickly as possible is strongly advised. If the reviewers suggest collecting new data, try to collect it, if possible. All of the reviewers' concerns should be carefully, civilly, and fully addressed and elaborated upon in the response. Remember that reviewers are not always enemies and the editor can be an important friend (Beatty 1999).

Getting Tenure and Research Pressure

Not only is learning to write and publish important, but new marketing academics must mentally prepare themselves for a different kind of pressure in a tenure-earning faculty position. It is no secret that the bar for earning tenure is rising with each passing year. At some institutions, the hurdle has risen nearly exponentially in the past five years, creating pressures on new faculty that previously were not experienced (Cassulo 1998; Wilson 2001). In fact, at many institutions the common procedure is to accelerate the whole tenure process, evaluating new faculty years before going up for tenure and "showing them the door" if it appears that they will not meet future promotion and tenure requirements. Wilson (2001) reports that at many nationally-recognized institutions, junior faculty are evaluated in their fourth year by all tenured faculty in the department, with a concurrence by a college-level committee also required to continue employment. Some universities have instituted third-year reviews that require outside letters of recommendation for continued employment (Wilson 2001).

New scholars should learn about tenure and the tenure process at their respective institutions. Tips on tenure policies can be found in the report "Good Practice in Tenure Evaluation: Advice for Tenured Faculty, Department Chairs and Academic Administrators," published by the American Council on Education, the American Association of University Professors, and the United Educators Insurance Risk Retention Group (a firm that provides insurance to universities including coverage for legal disputes over tenure), at <http://www.acenet.edu>. Advice for two-career academic couples can also be found in *Colloquy in Print* (Chronicle of Higher Education, May 26, 2000).

CONCLUSION

Based on suggestions from the marketing education literature and on our own personal experiences and observations, we have offered

several guidelines and recommendations for new faculty. These include dissertation topic breadth and interest, cooperation with the advisor, and the conceptual linkage to related areas of research. In addition, we addressed several issues that relate to sustaining the research agenda, including understanding general threats to research productivity, building collaborative rela-

tionships, "learning" how to publish, and understanding the research pressure of a tenure-track faculty member. We hope that these are useful. In addition, we hope that perhaps our ideas lead others to qualitatively and empirically investigate factors essential to success in the marketing academic area.

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