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# A qualitative study of IMP researchers' perceptions of 'managerial relevance'

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## Abstract

*The creation of new knowledge is the primary goal of the academic research community, including researchers into interaction and networks in business markets. There are other stakeholders besides marketing practitioners who have a legitimate interest in the efforts of business academics. Nevertheless, many business-to-business researchers feel an affinity for the managerial community, within which many of them have either worked, or plied their trade as consultants, or both. Accordingly, they believe that managerial relevance is an important consideration in the research that they undertake. For a variety of reasons, they do not believe that interaction and networks research has made as much impact on management practice as they would like. Most obviously, academic researchers generally feel obliged to write interminable, abstruse articles in journals that managers never read (indeed have seldom ever heard of). How might we go about improving this state of affairs?*

## Do we care about managerial relevance?

There is a burgeoning literature on the theme of the relevance of academic research in the management fields to practitioners (Aram & Salipante, 2003; Cornelissen, 2002; Das, 2003; McLean, MacIntosh, & Grant, 2002; Mezias & Starbuck, 2003; O'Driscoll & Murray, 1998; Starkey & Madan, 2001; Wierenga, 2002). The field of interaction and networks in industrial markets has not proved immune to this outbreak of soul-searching. At the 1999 IMP conference a plenary discussion of the relevance of research in this tradition to marketing practitioners was provoked by Brennan and

Turnbull's paper (Brennan & Turnbull, 1999) alleging the managerial irrelevance of IMP. Subsequently, at the 2000 IMP conference Brennan and Turnbull (Brennan & Turnbull, 2000) presented the results of a survey of IMP conference participants showing that the delegates considered the work presented at the conference to be of only limited relevance to managers, but their own work to be much more relevant. At the same conference, Easton (Easton, 2000) presented the provocatively titled "Is relevance relevant?" in which he argued that we know little about what marketing managers actually do, and therefore are poorly placed to provide them with concrete decision-relevant advice. Easton argued that researchers may indeed be able to provide broad, background knowledge on the nature of inter-firm relationships and networks which is valuable at a fairly abstract level to practitioners, but that application contexts are far too idiosyncratic to yield to simple generalisations based on generic research. In any event, queried Easton, is it necessarily the case that marketing managers must be the only, or even the principal, stakeholder in the IMP project? Surely society as a whole, and the pure pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, among others, represent equally valid stakeholders?

There is reasonable evidence, however, that IMP researchers are not completely satisfied with the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, and are interested in making their work relevant to managers. Table 1 presents some findings from the survey of delegates to the 1999 IMP conference in Dublin (Brennan & Turnbull, 2000).

(Table 1 here)

A clear majority believed that managers were ‘moderately’ or ‘very’ enthusiastic about adopting ideas from academic research in business-to-business marketing, and a great majority thought that it was ‘moderately’ or ‘very’ important for academic research to be of potential practical value to managers. Respondents were very optimistic about the value of their own research to managers. An overwhelming majority believed that their own work would be of interest to managers, of practical value to managers, and relevant to management needs. It does not seem unreasonable to infer from these data that the majority of IMP researchers believe that academic research *should* be relevant to managers, and that their own research *is* relevant to managers. In passing, it is worth observing that, by a small majority, respondents felt that the IMP conference proceedings were *not* relevant to managers – this probably reflects the role of the conference as principally a forum for the discussion of new ideas rather than applied problem solving.

This paper is organised as follows. In this introductory section, we have established that many IMP researchers care about managerial relevance and aspire to make their work of value to managers. In the next section, by reviewing recent literature, we show that there is a substantial weight of opinion in marketing, management and related fields expressing concern about the limited relevance of academic research to management practitioners. We then move on to describe the method and results we used to explore attitudes among interaction and networks researchers towards managerial relevance. In the conclusion are some brief suggestions for improving knowledge transfer in this field of research.

## Academic/practitioner knowledge transfer

The subject of academic/practitioner knowledge transfer has attracted growing interest in recent years across a range of managerial disciplines. External factors, such as public funding levels and increased competition within the higher education sector, are causing academic institutions and researchers to reflect on their role within society and perceive the need to make their research more relevant to the concerns of key stakeholders – in the case of marketing the practitioner community is such a stakeholder. As a result, some writers have asserted that researchers will have to move away from single-discipline abstract research in the direction of trans-disciplinary, problem-centred research. This is the oft-cited move from Mode 1 to Mode 2 knowledge production (Gibbons et al., 1994). In making their work more relevant to management practitioners, academic researchers have certain barriers to overcome. For example, the academic incentive structure does not favour applied research, academic institutions are not perceived as reliable partners by businesses, and standard academic modes of written expression are profoundly unattractive to managers (Ankers & Brennan, 2002; Starkey & Madan, 2001). Researchers will have to develop new competencies (Hodgkinson, Herriot, & Anderson, 2001), greater familiarity with the managerial world (Das, 2003), and their research will be judged against the double hurdle of rigour and relevance (Varadarajan, 2003) in order to qualify as 'pragmatic science' rather than descending to the sad depths of 'puerile science' (Hodgkinson et al., 2001). Increasingly, some have asserted, the validity of academic research will be defined in terms of usefulness, and the gap between theory and practice will gradually diminish bringing about greater 'synchrony' (Aram & Salipante, 2003; O'Driscoll & Murray, 1998).

It is fair to say that the picture painted in the preceding paragraph represents an emerging orthodoxy, at least in the Anglo-American world. However, there are dissenting voices. For example, Grey (2001) has argued that by making managerial relevance a central concern, and so abandoning the pursuit of pure knowledge, management researchers risk undermining their unique position in the knowledge production process and devaluing their own credibility. Several authors, including Varadarajan (2003), Grey (2001) and Brennan (2004) have observed that management practitioners are only one stakeholder in academic research and that the needs of other stakeholders may be equally legitimate. There is by no means unanimity that the pursuit of managerial relevance is currently an issue of overwhelming importance for management researchers. Nevertheless, in this section and the preceding one we have shown that there is broad academic concern in the management sciences about the transfer of knowledge from academic researchers to practitioners, and that many IMP researchers wish to make their research valuable to practitioners. We now move on to look at our recent qualitative study of attitudes towards academic/practitioner knowledge transfer among IMP researchers.

## Objectives and method

This paper reports on a project to explore in depth the attitudes of a sample of researchers in the interaction and networks tradition to the relationship between academic research and marketing practice in the field of business-to-business marketing. Data for the project were gathered over the period November 2003 to February 2004 by means of in-depth interviews with a sample of eight researchers based in the UK. Both convenience sampling and purposive sampling were used to select the interviewees. The UK-based sample is convenient for the UK-based authors. We acknowledge that the picture may be different in other countries and that a logical extension to this work is to extend it internationally. Regarding sample selection, all of the interviewees have attended at least one IMP conference within the last three years. However, the sample was chosen to include some interviewees who had attended many such conferences, and other interviewees who had attended few – in the case of one interviewee, only the 2003 conference in Lugano.

Table 2 provides brief details of the interviewees. The sampling strategy was judgemental, with the aim of obtaining a balanced view from across a range of British higher education institutions. In particular, different UK universities can have very different missions, with some specialising very heavily in research, while others focus primarily on teaching and only engage in limited research. The final column of table 2 indicates that the respondents were fairly equally balanced between different types of institution. Table 2 shows that the interviewees varied considerably in terms of their practical business experience (from zero to 18 years), their academic experience and their consulting experience. It is noteworthy that *all* of the interviewees had some practical exposure to the business world, either as managers themselves, or as consultants.

(Table 2 here)

# Findings

## *Purpose and relevance of IMP research*

"The problem is that 98% of managers, you ask them to tell you what books on marketing they know of and they all say Kotler, none of them say David Ford's books on managing business relationships. But those people that have been through the courses and have been exposed to the ideas, I think they do find them relevant. So the question is why has the IMP Group been so bad at selling its relevance? And the answer I suspect is we don't care." (Interviewee 3)

The interviewees were asked about their views on the purpose of academic research in marketing and its relevance to marketing practice. The consensus among the interviewees was that the fundamental purpose of academic research must be the generation of new 'leading edge' knowledge about marketing phenomena; hence the basic role of the academic researcher must be the creation of new knowledge. However, this consensus broke down over the degree of responsibility that the academic researcher has for knowledge dissemination. Of course, all interviewees acknowledged the importance of dissemination, with the common observation that publishing research is a goal of ever-increasing importance for academic researchers. Differences between interviewees emerged over where the role of the academic researcher ended. On the one hand the role of the academic was perceived to end once the knowledge was in the public domain. For example:

"To provide leading edge knowledge to society but if that society chooses not to use it I don't think it is our job to beat up on them and say 'you're idiots'. You can put the water in the trough and bring the horse to the trough, but if they don't want to drink then that's not an academic's problem." (Interviewee 1)

On the other hand, the role of the academic was considered to be that of intermediary, not only creating knowledge but also acting as the conduit and the interpreter of that knowledge for the managerial community.

"I see it as my role to be relevant to practitioners … I see my role, and I see the role of (employing institution) to be positioned between theory and practice." (Interviewee 2)

"My position is to go towards what difference does it make - so what for the business world? Are we disseminating information by talking to one group of managers and then making it available to a wider audience. Is that the benefit? Because if all you're doing is describing what managers are doing already, well, they already know that, don't they!" (Interviewee 7)

The former position implies that academic responsibility terminates with the publication of research findings in academic outlets. The latter position implies that the marketing academic has a responsibility to 'translate' that knowledge into a more palatable format for consumption by practitioners, whether by writing for professional journals, through MBA teaching, the delivery of management courses, or some other means. As we observed above, however, different higher education institutions have different missions. There is clearly room within the higher education sector for universities that focus primarily on knowledge creation and limit dissemination to academic journals, and others that are more concerned about the wider dissemination of ideas to the practitioner community (and both types of institution were represented among our interviewees).

### *The knowledge transfer process & barriers to transfer*

"There has been an ongoing debate about the relevance of what the IMP Group does, and the IMP Group has been very poor in selling its message to managers … we haven't sold our wares well enough to managers … we're not good at selling our ideas." (Interviewee 3)

It is clear that our interviewees do not view the knowledge transfer process in interaction and networks research as unidirectional from researchers to practitioners. Rather, the view that emerged was of a two-way flow of information, in which researchers conduct studies of management practice, then conceptualise and generalise what they learn and transform it into new knowledge

"I think it works two ways in the sense that business is often in front of the academics. By going out and talking to business we bring that back and begin to put frameworks around it and we model it and we play with it and we tease out and dissect (the underlying meaning of business concepts)." (Interviewee 6)

"To me it feeds into the interaction with the managers … it's actually to think differently, to get managers to look at the way they deal with suppliers or customers, how they develop relationships and strategies … to give them a chance to reflect on your account of what they have actually told you." (Interviewee 7)

When it came to the issue of barriers to effective communication between academics and practitioners, and how to improve communication, some related themes emerged. Three principal barriers were mentioned – the academic reward system, work pressures on academics, and the communications process. Interviewees believed that academic career success depends principally on the publication of papers in highly rated academic journals, and that such journals will not publish applied work, preferring research that focuses on conceptual and theoretical developments. For example:

"The biggest barrier is probably the reward structure, it does worry me how we are rewarded for publishing research … I understand the rules of the game, we play the game, that doesn't mean I like the rules. The kind of research that would get me published in 'A' rated journals is not the kind of stuff that managers find useful. When is the last time that you spoke to a manager who ever read anything in the *Journal of Marketing* or the *Journal of Marketing Research*?" (Interviewee 3)

Concerning work pressures, it was observed that the amount of time demanded from academic staff for management and administrative tasks, together with increasing student to staff ratios, had brought about a decline in the time available for research. In any event, interviewees were of the opinion that even if they had more time, and even if applied research contributed more to career success, there was a dearth of available publications through which to publish practitioner-orientated research. They pointed to a 'hole in the middle', between academic journals written by academics for academics, and trade journals that focused largely on the day-to-day minutiae of particular markets or industries.

### *Successful knowledge transfer?*

> "What academics can do very well for practitioners is help them conceptualise and visualise the problems they've got without feeding them a particular line as consultants try and do." (Interviewee 8)

Finally, in this discussion of the interviews with academic researchers, it is interesting that there was a degree of consensus, and a fair degree of optimism, regarding the transfer of practical tools from academic research to the business community. Broadly, the interviewees observed that business-to-business marketing organisations were today making far greater use of 'relationship management' tools than in the past. Specific mention was made of such practical concepts as the *relationship manager*, the *key account manager*, the *relationship audit*, *relationship portfolio analysis* and *managing channel relationships*. Clearly, it was felt that the adoption of these concepts and of management systems based on them by businesses could be attributed, at least in part, to their development and elaboration by the academic research community. This was generally acknowledged to be a two-way process, with researchers first observing and describing the early development of relationship management within industry, and then elaborating and refining the associated concepts before feeding them back through education, training and textbooks. Further iterations of this process would lead to better defined concepts and improved practitioner tools.

In passing, it should be observed that Ankers and Brennan (Ankers & Brennan, 2002), in a qualitative study of UK business-to-business marketing practitioners, found that managers did not acknowledge the contribution of academic researchers to the development of useful management tools. This suggests that there is a perceptual gap between researchers and practitioners; a gap, we would suggest, that merits further investigation.

## Limitations and conclusion

An important limitation of this research is the UK bias in the fieldwork. The modal group of respondents to the conference survey (Brennan & Turnbull, 2000) was UK academics, and the interviews reported here were all conducted in the UK. It is possible that there are systematic national differences in the perception of relevance in business-to-business research; Easton (personal communication with the authors) has suggested that the Scandinavian countries may differ markedly from the UK in respect of academic/practitioner cooperation in the field and has embarked on a study to investigate this proposition.

Even given this limitation, it is clear that the academic and practitioner worlds are not hermetically sealed units - they overlap. For example:

"The paradox is that quite a number of us do a lot of work with companies and we're very comfortable wearing two hats … the first three days of this week I've been talking to a French company, trying to help them solve some problems, then it wasn't particularly academic at all, so I do think we're happy wearing two hats."
(Interviewee 3)

Table 2 showed that our qualitative sample of IMP researchers had a substantial amount of practical business experience, and considerable consulting experience. One interviewee occupied a business-sponsored lectureship. Two other interviewees had each been involved in multiple Knowledge Transfer Partnership projects (formerly Teaching Company Schemes) involving very close cooperation with an industrial partner. The quantitative sample of 58 business-to-business academics (Brennan & Turnbull, 2000) yielded a similar profile: a mean of 7.6 years of business experience (only 14% had none), and 55% of the respondents had consulting experience. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that we have found business-to-business researchers to be optimistic about the transfer of knowledge to practitioners and optimistic about the interest, value and relevance of their work to managers. Although they generally believe that the role of the academic researcher is to create leading-edge knowledge, members of the IMP research community clearly want to cooperate with practitioners and contribute to practice. Indeed, they often get involved with organisations at the practical level through consulting projects. It seems to us that this wish goes beyond the provision of broad concepts and frameworks to help managers make sense of their world, which seems to be the limit placed on the practical contribution of IMP researchers by some commentators (Easton, 2000; Håkansson & Ford, 1999). Many (perhaps most) IMP researchers have been in business themselves, and aspire, through their research, to help managers at a level closer to concrete decision-making than that.

Even if what we aspire to is the transfer of broad concepts and frameworks, it would seem that there is considerable work to be done. Managers appear not to read academic marketing journals, and seem to want their information presented in an easily digestible – probably electronic – format (McKenzie, Wright, Ball, & Baron, 2002). Strikingly, the IMP Group has at its disposal a suitable electronic medium already (www.impgroup.com), and a substantial ‘back catalogue’ of material that could, potentially, be presented in a format attractive to managers. In any event, it would not seem so arduous to us to require all future contributors to IMP conferences to submit a summary of the managerial implications of their work in addition to an abstract - since this would serve a different purpose. The addition of a ‘managerial implications’ index to the Group web site, with links to the papers would surely not be so hard?

It is striking that, in marked contrast to the IMP tradition, the major American research institutes for business marketing and purchasing make considerable efforts to communicate the results of their studies to the practitioner community and make practitioner relevance central to their purpose. Both the *Institute for the Study of Business Markets* at Penn State University and the *Center for Business and Industrial Marketing* at Georgia State University illustrate how to go about making academic research available to the practitioner community, through media such as joint meetings, training programmes, discussion papers, newsletters, and the effective use of the worldwide web. The marked differences between the IMP Group and these American institutes in terms of academic-practitioner knowledge transfer suggest propositions for future research. Of course, the *ISBM* and the *CBIM* are corporate entities located within single academic institutions, while the IMP Group is a network with no single academic home. Is the organisational structure a key factor in determining the effectiveness of academic-practitioner knowledge transfer? On the other hand, could underlying cultural differences lie behind the observed differences? The IMP Group is a network made up largely of European researchers. Could it be that the culture and environment of management research in Europe are less favourable to academic-practitioner knowledge transfer than the culture and environment of management research in the USA? In those parts of the world, such as the UK, Australia and New Zealand, where governments are demanding that in return for public funding universities must demonstrate what contribution their research makes to the wider community in general and to economic success in particular, these are pertinent questions.

Table 1: Perceptions of relevance among IMP conference delegates (Dublin 1999)

| Question | % None/little | % Moderate/substantial |
|---|---|---|
| How enthusiastic are managers to adopt ideas from business-to-business academic research? | 31.6 | 68.4 |
| How important is it that academic research should be of potential practical value? | 17.9 | 82.1 |
| Of how much interest would your current research be to managers? | 8.6 | 91.4 |
| Of how much practical value would your current research be to managers? | 6.9 | 93.1 |
| Overall, how relevant would you say your current research was to management needs? | 6.9 | 93.1 |

Table 2: Characteristics of the qualitative sample of academics

| Interviewee | Business experience (years) | Academic experience (years) | Any consulting experience? | Academic status | Mission of employing institution |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 10 | 25 | Yes | Professor | Primarily research; teaching secondary |
| 2 | 18 | 8 | No | Lecturer/Senior Lecturer | Balanced research & teaching |
| 3 | 6 | 16 | Yes | Professor | Primarily research; teaching secondary |
| 4 | 9 | 7 | No | Lecturer/Senior Lecturer | Primarily teaching; growing research |
| 5 | 5 | 15 | Yes | Lecturer/Senior Lecturer | Balanced research & teaching |
| 6 | 10 | 20 | Yes | Reader | Primarily teaching; growing research |
| 7 | 5 | 12 | No | Lecturer/Senior Lecturer | Primarily research; teaching secondary |
| 8 | 0 | 5 | Yes | Lecturer/Senior Lecturer | Primarily teaching; research secondary |

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