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**The academic/practitioner gap in business to business marketing: A review and future research directions**

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**Abstract**

There is concern that academic research in marketing does not sufficiently help practitioners solve their day-to-day, practical problems. The purpose of this study is to systematically review the literature that focuses on the academic/practitioner gap within the field of business-to-business markets and identify potential unexplored research opportunities in this area. Drawing on the B2B marketing literature and other related areas, the study provides a critical discussion of the literature that deals with the topic of relevance gap between the communities of academics and practitioners which is organized in five themes: the case of managerial relevance; the reasons of the gap between academics and practitioners; and the ways to bridge the gap. The study concludes by proposing an agenda for future research. The study aims to contribute to B2B marketing literature by providing an updated review of the pertinent literature along with insights of how B2B marketing research is evolving and what needs to be done to reach out to practitioners.

**Keywords:** academic/practitioner gap, marketing research, managerial relevance

## INTRODUCTION

The relevance of academic research to practitioners has emerged the last years as one of the most important issues in marketing. Managerial relevance is the degree to which a specific manager in an organization perceives academic knowledge to aid his or her job-related thoughts or actions in the pursuit of organizational goals (Jaworski, 2011). Many academics view managerial relevance as the primary aim of academic research (Piercy, 2000). On the other hand, others argue for a more balanced view, suggesting that practitioners may not be the main stakeholder in academic research (Grey, 2001). Regardless of whether managerial relevance should be the primary objective of academic research or not, marketing is a practical discipline and, as such, academic research should be relevant to practitioners (Baines *et al.*, 2009). However, marketing is becoming increasingly irrelevant to practice (Reibstein *et al.*, 2009). Practitioners are often not interested in the methodological and theoretical advances of marketing research; their priority is to satisfy day-to-day practical needs.

The academic/practitioner gap in business to business marketing has not gone unnoticed by the academic community. A recent special issue at the *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing* (vol. 29, no. 7/8, 2014) dedicated on the issue of managerial relevance in B2B research demonstrates the increasing importance of the topic for the academic community. A number of articles have studied the importance of managerial relevance of marketing research, and have advanced the understanding of why the research conducted within the business to business marketing field, even though is often of high quality and magnitude, it does not reach managers to a great extent (Sheth and Sharma, 2006; Age and Cederlund, 2014). The importance of the topic within the academic community is strong and growing and signals the need to review the relevant literature, particularly in terms of potential research opportunities. However, to date existing literature reports no systematic attempt to review the academic/practitioner gap in business to business marketing.

The purpose of this study is to bring together and systematically review the body of research dealing with the academic/practitioner gap in business-to-business markets and identify potential unexplored research opportunities in this area. The study contributes to the research base by providing a comprehensive and updated review of the literature that deals with the academic/practitioner gap in business to business marketing along with a sense of how the discussion of managerial relevance of marketing research is evolving. The study aims to offer useful insights to academics who would like to produce research of practical value but, in so far, have failed or are struggling to do so.

## RESEARCH ON THE ACADEMIC/PRACTITIONER GAP

The issue of a “relevance gap” in marketing research is increasingly debated. There is also evidence that the gap between managers and researchers could be especially significant within the field of B2B marketing (Åge and Cederlund, 2014; Brennan and Turnbull, 2000, 2002; Ankers and Brennan, 2002). B2B research is defined as the study of commercial business relationships between organizations (Hadjikhani and LaPlaca, 2013, p. 294). B2B research involves a wide range of topics such as organizational buying, internal alignment, sales force management, customer relationships and complex networks (e.g. Ford and Håkansson, 2006; Möller, 2010; Hunt, 2013). B2B research has been increasingly trying to explain complex networks and phenomena around business relationships (Hadjikhani and LaPlaca, 2013). This complexity of networks and business relationships in the B2B context calls for more relevance (Åge, 2011). However, although the research conducted within the

B2B marketing field is often of high quality and magnitude, it does not reach managers to a great extent (Åge & Cederlund, 2014). Practitioners are usually not interested in the methodological and theoretical advances of marketing research; their priority is to satisfy day-to-day practical needs (Brennan and Ankers, 2004).

In addition to the study of academic/practitioner gap in the context of B2B research, the relevance gap has been examined in the broader marketing literature (Jaworski, 2011; Lilien, 2011; MacInnis, 2011; Varadarajan, 2003; Ottesen and Grønhaug, 2004; Roberts *et al.*, 2014),) as well as in the strategic management literature (Weick, 2001; Starbuck, 2004; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2011). These improvements show that the gap between what the academics suggest (theory) and how the practitioners actually act (practice) is common across the broader business management study, providing thus additional evidence for the conclusions the research on B2B research has reached into. The research on the academic/practitioner gap in the B2B marketing field can benefit from advancements in these closely-related areas.

Drawing on prior research, we segment the research on the academic/practitioner gap within the context of B2B marketing into studies that concentrate on addressing the following research questions: 1. What managerial relevance involves? 2. Why there is a gap between academics and practitioners?, and 3. How the gap can be bridged? In the following paragraphs we go through each of the themes.

### **The case of managerial relevance in B2B marketing**

Recent years have seen a widespread debate about the relevance of academic research to business practice in marketing. Managerial relevance is generally viewed as the applicability of research findings, concepts, theories, frameworks, models, and measurement instruments to practical problems (Brennan and Turnbull, 2002). Emphasizing more on the individual manager's viewpoint, Jaworski (2011, p. 212) defined managerial relevance as the degree to which a specific manager in an organization perceives academic knowledge to aid his or her job-related thoughts or actions in the pursuit of organizational goals.

Many academics view managerial relevance as the primary aim of academic research (Piercy, 2000, 2002; Tapp, 2004). On the other hand, others argue for a more balanced view, suggesting that practitioners may not be the main stakeholder in academic research (Easton, 2000; Grey, 2001). Indeed, Jaworski (2011) suggests that marketing academics can be divided into two camps. The first suggests includes scholars who believe that managerial relevance is a *sine qua non* of academic research. For these scholars, nothing can be more important than having a direct impact on the practice of marketing. The second camp includes scholars who believe that managerial relevance is entirely optional and that striving for relevance may impair the search for scientific truth. According to this school of thought, managerial relevance need not be the centerpiece of academic research. Nevertheless, there is a clear consensus that marketing as a field of study is allied to the practice of marketing and, as a consequence, relevance to practitioners should be of considerable concern to academics (Baines *et al.*, 2009; Jaworski 2011). The central idea behind this body of literature is that academic research, regardless of its motivation (i.e. advance knowledge, address real managerial problems, or both), should stay close to company practice (Holmlund *et al.*, 2016; Brennan *et al.*, 2014; Jaworski, 2011; Piercy, 2002).

However, as a considerable weight of recently published research attests, evidence suggests that the relevance of academic research to marketing practice seems to be quite low and, quite possibly, declining (Piercy 2002; Brennan & Ankers 2004; Tapp 2004; Reibstein *et al.*, 2009). The Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) research group, which was

influenced by the belief that B2B marketing theory was not in line with the realities of the business world, also point out the lack of relevance within the B2B marketing research (Bonoma and Johnston, 1978; Håkansson, 1982). Brennan and Turnbull (2002) argue that although IMP research has generated much knowledge that is applicable, the applications have seldom reached practitioners to a great extent. Even though marketing researchers increasingly recognize the importance for research to be of potential value to managers (Brennan and Turnbull, 2000), it seems that the gap between academics and practitioners within the B2B marketing field is still true (Cederlund, 2014; Salminen *et al.*, 2014).

### **Why there is a gap between academics and practitioners?**

Even though literature has widely recognized that there should be more collaboration between the academic and practitioner communities (Brennan and Turnbull, 2000; Baines *et al.*, 2009), the fact is that the research conducted within the B2B marketing field fails to reach managers to a great extent (Åge & Cederlund, 2014). This brings the discussion to the following question: why does academic marketing research have little to say to actual managerial needs?

Literature has identified many reasons for academic research not being sufficiently close to practice. Scholars' academic writing style, which is usually sophisticated and specialized, making the content of articles hard to digest for managers (Ankers and Brennan, 2002; Buckley *et al.*, 1998), the academic contributions are loosely connected to practice (Lilien, 2011) and the insufficient contact forums between researchers and managers (Holmlund *et al.*, 2016) have been identified as reasons of the low managerial relevance of marketing research.

Literature also suggest that a key reason for the gap between researchers and practitioners is the fact that practitioners' needs are characterized by a complexity that research has not been able to keep up with (c.f. Åge and Cederlund, 2014). This indicate the need to reconsider the nature of the methodological approach that researchers use. Building on this argument, top academic marketing journals are argued to be too focused on quantitative modeling and that prevents practitioners from adopting ideas from academic research (Reibstein *et al.*, 2009; Brennan, 2004; Gummesson, 2006). Some researchers see the quantitative methodologies as a barrier in order to reach practitioners, and strongly favor qualitative research, especially when the studies deal with complex phenomena (Gummesson, 2006). Kowalkowski (2015) argues that "too much research in marketing focuses on narrow methodological issues and esoteric phenomena detached from the reality of the business world" (p. 55). On the other hand, there are researchers who suggest that the academic efforts towards managerial relevance can benefit from quantitative research. Lilien (2011) suggests that marketing decision models provide several benefits for practice in that they improve the consistency of decisions, enable the exploration of more decision options, assess the effectiveness of decision variables and facilitate group decision-making.

From a more pragmatic viewpoint, academic research in B2B marketing is argued to be too general and slow (Ankers and Brennan, 2004). Even if a journal article aims to address a real-life managerial issue, the time required for the submission of the manuscript to a journal, the review process and the publication of the paper is so excessive that the problem under investigation is practically outdated (Brennan *et al.*, 2014)! Marketing research becomes therefore of limited practical value to practitioners.

From a rather different perspective, Ankers and Brennan (2004), Baines *at al.* (2009) and Brennan *et al.* (2014) report on a number of findings emphasizing the role of the working conditions in the academic/practitioner gap. In particular, the barriers to effective

communication between academics and practitioners are considered to be mainly due to: (1) The academic reward system does not encourage practically relevant research. Academic career mainly depends on publication in highly-rated referee journals. However, managers do not find any particular interest in such journals. It may seem a kind of paradox, but although the kind of research that academia values is the least interesting to practitioners; the academic reward system does not encourage practically relevant research (Brennan and Ankers, 2004). (2) Work pressures on academics. Due to their heavy workload (increasing students/staff ratio, administrative tasks, etc) they have limited time for research. The results show though that even if they had more time and even if applied research contributed more to career success, there were a limited number of available publications that could serve as the outlet of practitioner-oriented research.

In conclusion, even though marketing research should be of practical value to practitioners, the fact is that academics fail to translate and transfer the knowledge they create to practitioners. Literature has proposed several potential reasons for the academic/practitioner gap. The review of the pertinent literature shows that there is room for exploring the balance of a scientific discipline from the perspective of managerial relevance in the area of B2B marketing (Åge and Cederlund, 2014).

#### **How the gap between academics and practitioners can be bridged?**

This group of studies aim to address how the gap between academics and practitioners can be narrowed. Reibstein *et al.* (2009) in their seminar study concluded that the prevailing paradigm of empirical studies in marketing is data-driven. That means that we begin with a data set, we analyze the data, and only then we ask where it might be applied. The resulted conclusions may be of some relevance to the academic however it is doubtful if they offer useful and applied guidance to practitioners (Reibstein *et al.*, 2009). Brennan *et al.* (2014) argued that a better approach is to have a managerial problem (or problems) as a start point and based on this problem to design the methodology of the study. The result would be applied research that addresses specific managerial issues even if no new advanced methodologies or theories are proposed. In other words, marketing research should shift from problem finding to problem-solving (Hughes *et al.*, 2012). This can be done through joint research projects, reading trade/non-specialized magazines, attending at trade conferences or similar events (Brennan *et al.*, 2014). Baines *et al.* (2009), in an empirical study that was conducted among academics and practitioners in the market research sector, have shown that many academics (74.4% of the respondents) already have some previous consulting/training experience indicating therefore that academics can, relatively easily, come closer to the world of practitioners.

Other researchers see the changing of how academic publications work as a way to narrow the academic-practitioner gap (Reibstein *et al.*, 2009; McKenzie *et al.*, 2002; Brennan *et al.*, 2014). The primary target audience of referee journals is academics. Even the writing style, structure, citations etc. reflect this orientation. The question therefore that arises is are practitioners reading our publications or are we just talking to ourselves? (Reibstein *et al.*, 2009; McKenzie *et al.*, 2002). It is important therefore to make our publications more relevant. In order to address this issue, Reibstein *et al.* (2009) call for more conceptual papers. They suggest that leading academic journals should publish papers that insightfully address practical managerial issues even if they do not introduce sophisticated theories or advanced methodologies. Currently, there seems to be limited interest among the leading journals for thoughtful, rigorous conceptual articles that suggest new research directions (Reibstein *et al.*, 2009; MacInnis, 2011). Moreover, conceptual articles could make at least as great a contribution to marketing practice as do empirical articles (Yadav, 2010). Perhaps inviting

practitioners to review for these journals, along with academics, would be particularly useful in ensuring the managerial relevance of the papers (Brennan *et al.*, 2014). In line with this, there are calls that the writing style should be more simple (not simplistic) and accessible to practitioners (Brennan and Ankers, 2004; Kuusela *et al.*, 2014). Academic writing is often not actionable for practitioners. Finally, Brennan and Ankers (2004) suggest that there is room for more ‘intermediary’ publications, aimed to be of interest to practitioners and applied academics (Brennan and Ankers, 2004). These ‘intermediary’ publications can serve as a common ground between academic and practitioner communities.

Reibstein *et al.* (2009) also recommends that institutes should take initiatives towards bridging the academic-practitioner gap. In particular, it is widely known that most promotion and salary decisions in academia largely depend on publications in highly-ranked referee journals. In addition, publishing in practice-based magazines (e.g. trade magazines or business publications focusing on specific sectors) is generally viewed from universities as ‘nice to have’ but definitely not a compulsory requirement in the progression of an academic’s career. The main assumption is that if we agree that part of the purpose of business schools is to advance the practice of business and, in our case, the practice of marketing, then the contributions to the advancement of marketing practice should be taken into consideration in the decisions for promotion, tenure and salary increases (Reibstein *et al.*, 2009; Calder and Tybout, 1999). This is a very interesting discussion which actually leads us to the question of whether the managerial relevance of academic research is an issue that involves merely the academics and practitioners. In this context, Brennan *et al.* (2014) argue that the attempt to reach out to practitioners involve four groups of stakeholders: researchers, practitioners, policymakers and academic managers and hence efforts in all these areas are needed to increase the relevance of B2B marketing research.

In line with the issue of institutional changes, there have been calls for reconsidering the PhD programs into a more practice-based direction (Lilien, 2011; Reibstein *et al.*, 2009; Brennan *et al.*, 2014). Most of the PhD programs today aim to provide training in research methodology and theory. However, what is of concern is how relevant to practitioners the PhD theses are and, subsequently, the publications derived from them. Marketing PhD theses tend to be too ‘theoretical’ with limited managerial relevance (Lilien, 2011; Danneels and Lilien, 1998). However, given that marketing is an applied business discipline, it is necessary to spend time in doctoral programs on knowing and understanding day-to-day problems and strategic issues managers face (Reibstein *et al.*, 2009). Thus, it is important for PhD students to have some kind of exposure to managerial issues before and/or during their studies. Literature has proposed a number of ways of how this can be done: (a) the topic of a PhD is under agreement between the university and a specific company or professional body (e.g. Strategic Account Management Association) (Brown, 2006; Brennan *et al.*, 2014). Students then will be invited to work on this pre-determined topic and further develop/enrich it. The findings will therefore directly address the managerial issues of the specific company/organization and then might be further generalized to the broader population of the study. (b) The student begins with the development of the conceptual framework of his/her PhD. Then the student presents his/her idea to various companies or professional bodies asking their collaboration on a win-win basis (Lilien, 2011). The student, for example, asks the companies to have access and use some of their data and, in return, he/she will consult with them, giving them insights on specific issues of their interest and offer them a final, customized, report after completion. (c) To encourage more PhD students to pursue research that makes a practical and theoretical contribution and this can suggest a key doctoral examination criterion. Of course, it is also the case that many professional doctorates (such as the Doctor of Business Administration or Professional Doctor degree) address practical

matters, but in this case the student is already a practitioner, usually senior level (Brennan *et al.*, 2014).

Important insights on the issue methodological approach of marketing research were offered at a recent special issue of *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing* devoted to managerial relevance (Gummesson, 2014; Gustavsson and Åge, 2014; Åge, 2014; Cederlund, 2014; Guiette *et al.*, 2014). The central message underpinning these studies was that managers' realities are characterized by an immense complexity that research has not been able to keep up with (Åge and Cederlund, 2014). The relevance of B2B marketing research will increase if it manages to embrace complexity to a greater extent (Åge and Cederlund, 2014). Gummesson (2014) and Gustavsson and Åge (2014) argue for the need for broader, more abstract conceptualizations to grasp this complexity, which will enhance the relevance for managers. Åge (2014) provide empirical evidence for this argument reporting findings from managers in three different companies who have actually used such abstract conceptualizations as creative devices to tackle challenges. In conclusion, that there is more that could (and should) be done so that academics can actually obtain a good feel for the practitioner's perspective and be able to provide concrete solutions to practical, real-life problems that practitioners face. Prior literature in B2B marketing has proposed a number of remedies towards this direction.

## CONCLUSIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This paper provides a literature review on the academic/practitioner gap and identifies an agenda for future research. Whilst the marketing literature has generally agreed that academics should not only create knowledge but they should translate and transfer this knowledge to practitioners, academic research in B2B marketing has been of limited practical value to practitioners (Ankers and Brennan, 2004; Baines *et al.*, 2009), a conclusion that seems to be still true (Åge and Cederlund, 2014). Three main themes have emerged from the literature (the case of managerial relevance, the reasons of the gap between academics and practitioners, and the ways to bridge the gap) within which more systematic research is needed to develop further understanding of how managerial relevance can be increased within the field of B2B marketing. The basic research questions that could be addressed by academics under each theme are outlined in Table 1.

### PLACE TABLE 1 AROUND HERE

Prior research focusing on the first two themes (the case of managerial relevance, the reasons of the gap between academics and practitioners) has reached at a high level of sophistication and depth of analysis, addressing a range of relevant topics. Even though there are issues at each theme that require further examination, we believe that more research is needed particularly on the third theme (how the gap between academics and practitioners can be bridged), which previous studies have also identified as dominant in the B2B marketing research (Åge and Cederlund, 2014). The two topics that, to our understanding, deserve more attention from researchers in the future are the methodology adopted and the stakeholders that can (and should) be involved in the further development of managerial relevance.

First, although academics need to reconsider the *methodology* adopted for their studies so as to reach practitioners, it is necessary to identify exactly how it needs to be done, the alternative methodology options and the suitability of each of them. Previous studies have called for stronger theoretical underpinnings and more flexible, interpretive research approaches to tap the richness in real-life business settings. Regardless of the actual methodology chosen (quantitative, case study, grounded theory, to name but a few), as everyone has its own pros and cons, closing relevance gaps in the field B2B marketing cannot

be done with quick fix recipes (Guiette *et al.*, 2014); a change of the mind-set is needed towards more applied, action research (Gummesson, 2014).

Second, research is needed to confirm the role key areas such as *academic managers, professional bodies, publications and PhD programs* play in order as to bridge the academic/practitioner gap. Practitioners need to know whether they can utilize the knowledge created within the broader academic world, either via PhD thesis or journal articles, to address their practical day to day needs. Obviously, addressing these issues also relates to institutional actions that are beyond individual academics' control, at least to some extent. For example, institutes are entitled to add 'impact' to the promotion process. However, academics, as individuals, can try to improve things and push for institutional changes. Future research can work towards this direction and provide solutions on how the various stakeholders can be motivated towards bringing more relevance in marketing research.

Having said that, we do not suggest that marketing research should focus on managerial impact neglecting its academic nature. That would be myopic. Advancing knowledge should remain a priority for academics. However, this should come along with a change in the mind-set: marketing academics should shift from viewing the advancement of marketing theory as the centerpiece of scholarship; marketing research can (and should) be relevant to practice as well (Katsikeas *et al.*, 2004). Otherwise any initiative, such as the ones we propose in the present study, is likely to be temporary and sporadic.

Concluding, there is a growing body of research on B2B marketing that captures the different facets of the broader issue of managerial relevance in marketing research, having focused on what managerial relevance means, why academic research fails to reach out to practitioners to a large extent and how this gap can be bridged. This research aims to provide, through a systematic review of the relevant literature, a picture of the evolution and state of academic research on this topic within the area of B2B marketing. It also provides a view of the topics that are most relevant to practitioners involved in the marketing practice, and how they relate to initiatives that can be taken by academics. To this end, it is crucial to systematically address the research questions in each of the areas and to subsequently investigate how these areas interact to fully determine how B2B marketing can be of more practical value to practitioners.

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**Table 1:** The academic/practitioner gap in business to business marketing: some future research directions

Theme	Research directions
The case of managerial relevance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ What should be the primary objective of marketing research?</li><li>▪ What does “relevance” mean to academics and to practitioners? Similarities/differences?</li><li>▪ To what extent academic research reach to practitioners (journal articles, etc)?</li></ul>
The reasons of the gap between academics and practitioners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Why there is a gap?</li><li>▪ What it consists of?</li><li>▪ Why, to date, there is no common ground between academic and practitioner communities?</li></ul>
Ways to bridge the gap between academics and practitioners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ How can academic research keep up with the pace of real-life, managerial problems?</li><li>▪ What methodological approaches should be adopted to increase the managerial relevance of marketing research?</li><li>▪ Is the bridging of the gap a concern of the researchers or should be a concern of other stakeholders as well (e.g. professional bodies, academic managers, policy makers)?</li><li>▪ Will the academic-practitioner gap be narrowed through decisions at a practical level (e.g. use of a different, less sophisticated writing style) or at a more strategic level (change of mind-set towards a more practice-based approach), or both are needed?</li><li>▪ Is the managerial relevance of marketing research an issue of marketing education?</li></ul>