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MARKETING | REVIEW ARTICLE

# Academic research into marketing: Many publications, but little impact?

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**Abstract:** This article reviews some issues associated with the way in which academic research into marketing is evaluated by UK education authorities using their research excellence framework (REF), in particular the impact component of the assessment. It discusses the extent to which research by marketing academics published in leading academic journals is relevant to the concerns of marketing management and how this relevance or lack of it may be reflected in the relative paucity of impact submissions in marketing. It considers the model of impact assessment used in the REF and how this differs from how marketing academics work in practice, giving three examples of significant impact that would not be acceptable under current rules. It concludes by suggesting that alternative models for impact should be investigated and suggests that using more practical models might result in better engagement of marketing academics with business, leading to greater relevance in teaching and employability of marketing graduates.

**Subjects: Marketing; Marketing Research; Higher Education**

**Keywords: research excellence framework (REF); marketing; research; impact; training; university; funding**

## 1. Introduction

This article was prompted by analysis of the impact case studies from the UK's 2014 Research Excellence Framework (REF), one of the bases for allocating government funding to universities and for rating universities. This analysis reveals the presence of very few marketing case studies relative to other management fields. Given that marketing is an applied subject, covering both marketing management and areas relevant to consumer and social policy, this lack of impact case studies is considered by the authors to be surprising.

A review of recent literature also demonstrates a long-standing concern about the practical relevance of academic research into marketing. While various proposals have been made to

## PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This article relates to the allocation of public funds raised from taxation to the funding of academic research into marketing at UK universities. It demonstrates that in a discipline whose justification is fundamentally practical, i.e., that it helps organisations of all kinds, whether private, public or voluntary sector, academic research is drifting away from practicality, creating a body of knowledge without much impact and serving mainly to further the careers of marketing academics. This situation is considered inappropriate, as it would in any discipline, whether practical or not, in the sense that it constitutes a compromise in the mission of the discipline. If academic researchers into marketing believe that their work is designed to train students to be more rigorous in analysis, for example, other disciplines—the source disciplines of marketing, such as economics, statistics, psychology or sociology—might be better equipped to do it.

increase the impact of academic research into marketing, there is little evidence of successful implementation of these proposals or of increased impact of academic research into marketing.

One methodological contribution of this paper is analysis of the marketing case studies submitted to the Business and Management (B&M) Unit of Assessment (UoA) for REF 2014a and comparison of these with those submitted by other disciplines to this UoA. We then analyse the articles produced in the last year for top marketing journals to identify how relevant they might be to different areas of marketing practice.

We then pose two questions: (1) Why has publishing in academic journals had such limited influence on practice, to the extent that there is a paucity of impact case studies in marketing? (2) Can marketing academics influence practice more directly? In exploring this second question we provide examples of case studies from the authors' consultative experiences of working with private-sector firms.

We provide a partial answer to the above questions by suggesting that there are alternative models of impact that could have been used. Three of these are suggested and investigated.

The article concludes with identification of how the situation can be improved, both in terms of ensuring that academics do engage more with the practical agenda of business and of ensuring that government funding of research is directed appropriately.

Finally, we suggest conclusions on the nature of the problem and recommendations for the future.

## 2. Disclaimer

This article's senior authors have no interest in the outcomes of the next government assessment of university research, research excellence framework 2012 (REF2021), as they are all likely to be retired by the time its results are announced. The article is a critique not of the publication of research into marketing in academic journals, which are a necessary part of the advance and codification of knowledge and its translation into teaching and eventual use in practice (McDonald, 2003). We acknowledge that many journals have tried to attract more articles with practitioner impact, while asking authors of the more "academic" articles to be much more specific about implications of their findings for practitioners. Nor does the article seek to criticise the efforts of many marketing academics to engage with industry—indeed it provides examples of several different modes of engagement outside academic journals. Rather, the article raises the question of the extent to which the body of marketing academics, as a whole, engage with practice and whether the approach to assessing the practical impact of research into marketing of the UK's REF is effective in capturing this. This is important because the behaviour of academics will be strongly influenced by the way their work is assessed.

## 3. The practical relevance of academic research into marketing

Concerns over the practical relevance of management research have been raised since the 1940s (Caswill & Wensley, 2007). There is a gap between academia and practice (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002; Rynes, 2007). University research and teaching is criticized as irrelevant to business needs (Bartunek & Rynes, 2014; Bennis & O'Toole, 2005; Huff, 2000; Mintzberg & Gosling, 2002; Starkey & Madan, 2001). Marketing has also been criticized in this respect. Baker and Erdogan (2000) quoted a survey of UK academics that suggested that the most pressing issue facing marketing theory was integration of theory and practice. The problem is said to stem from research, teaching and practice being seen as separate domains by academics (Mentzer & Schumann, 2006; Piercy, 2002), while marketing executives require research focused on solving problems in specific contexts (Storbacka, 2014). The widening divergence between marketing academia and practice is seen to damage the field's health (Reibstein, Day, & Wind, 2009). While much criticism relates to relevance to marketing management, marketing has responsibilities to stakeholders other than practitioners (Hunt, 2002). Research into marketing may be relevant to many areas of social and economic policy and so should make an impact in these areas.

The point about practical relevance goes to the heart of the question of what makes for good quality theory. Theory should be based on both originality and practical utility (Corley & Gioia, 2011; Piercy, 2002) and so should be based in the reality of the human experience of practice (Jarzabkowski, Mohrman, & Scherer, 2010; Knights & Scarborough, 2010; Mason, Kjellberg, & Hagberg, 2015). Collaboration with practitioners, customers and stakeholders is an important element in theory development (Brodie, 2017) and in marketing management. This requires understanding of how research is relevant to practitioners' roles in their organizations (Jaworski, 2011). Sheth and Sisodia (1999) suggest that marketing is more context-dependent than many fields of scientific enquiry and that its context is changing due to electronic commerce, market diversity, new (post-industrial age) economics and a stronger focus on cooperation instead of competition. Since the article of Sheth and Sisodia (1999), the marketing communications environment has changed greatly (Keller, 2009), with the proliferation of digital commerce changing how suppliers and customers transact (Keller, 2009) and social media and blogging changing how suppliers and customers communicate (Kietzmann, Hermkens, Mccarthy, & Silvestre, 2011; Valos, Fatemeh, Casidy, Driesener, & Maplestone, 2016). The impact of changing context on theory development is therefore very significant. Harrigan and Hulbert (2011) suggest that the curriculum of marketing courses does not reflect how technology has changed the context.

Another contextual argument relates to how far research into marketing covers different sectors. Ankers and Brennan (2002) research with business-to-business (B2B) managers found little awareness of current research and thinking, with any awareness being based on a previous generation of textbooks. Lilien (2016) argues that with a similar economic weight of B2B and B2C transactions, the two sectors might expect similar levels of academic attention. However, that is not the case, with B2B marketing accounting for a small fraction of academic research attention.

The divide between marketing academia and practice has been linked to a decline in marketing's strategic influence in organizations (McDonald, 2009; Webster, Malter, & Ganesan, 2003, 2005). Marketing's role in organizations is ill-defined and marketers fail to use tools that could make them more accountable (Baker & Holt, 2004). Yet according to McDonald (2003), only 4% of articles in the foremost academic marketing journals addressed the top 10 issues of concern to practitioners. As Jaworski (2011) observes, the academic marketing community is split on the desirability of collaboration with practice.

## 4. Marketing impact case studies in REF 2014

The UK's REF periodically reviews each university's research, with implications for future funding. REF 2014b included a new element requiring universities to provide case studies demonstrating the wider impact of their research. Impact was defined as "any effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia" (REF, 2014b) and published a report analysing the REF impact case studies (King's College, London, 2015). The process was specified as follow:

An impact case study is a short four-page document which has five sections:

(1) Summary of the impact
(2) A description of the underpinning research
(3) References to the research
(4) Details of the impact
(5) Sources to corroborate the impact.

Each case study was assessed by using two criteria: (1) Reach—"the spread or breadth of influence or effect on the relevant constituencies" and (2) Significance—"the intensity or the influence or effect" (REF, 2014b).

The guidelines for the case studies stressed that they needed to demonstrate that a change beyond academia had taken place *as a result of the research* (REF, 2014b Report).

This latter approach may be problematic, for marketing and perhaps for other disciplines. In the authors' view, some of the best academic marketing writings either document recent changes in marketing, providing a basis for enhancing and modernising marketing teaching and learning, and for training future generations of marketers, or provide concepts and findings which may be used by many marketers, who may be unknown to the writers. Indeed, one of your authors has engaged in many projects with commercial clients, the first stage of which was a review of academic literature and its translation into useful material for the project (Stone, 2013). However, given that impact case studies are the basis of assessment, it is interesting to note the divergence between marketing and other management disciplines in terms of the number of impact case studies submitted. However, it is not the purpose of this article to examine areas outside marketing, which is not within the competence of the authors, though such an examination seems sensible.

The model adopted seems at variance with thinking on the development of knowledge and its relationship with innovation, particularly in areas involving emergent concepts, where interaction between the agents involved should be a key focus, particularly but not exclusively in management disciplines (Snowden, 2003). It is also at variance with current thinking of innovation, which has moved away from the simplistic linear model (whether based on supply-push—simplistically, innovators produce innovations which are then applied, or demand pull—simplistically, customers require change and innovators respond by innovating) to a model based on much more complicated relationships and feedback and communication and other processes, taking place between the different stages of the innovation process and the different participants, with different types of process at work in different disciplines and sectors (Freeman & Soete, 1997; Pavitt, 1984). This applies particularly to the marketing ecosystem (Stone, 2014). This view of the creation of knowledge might lead to questioning of the use of the term "impact", as it implies a linear view—research is done and then it has an impact. In addition, the ecosystem view questions the focus on the application of university research outcomes in the impact cases, rather than how a team works across the boundaries between academia and industry. We could even argue that where these boundaries do exist, it is evidence of failure in the research process.

## 5. What the marketing and management impact case studies covered

The impact cases covered in this article were submitted to the B&M UoA. They are publicly available (REF 2014a Impact Case Studies Database) and evidence the economic, policy, environmental and societal impact of B&M research (Pidd & Broadbent, 2015). A total of 410 studies are included in the B&M UoA REF Impact Case Study database (See Table 1). A significant sub- area within this is "Commerce, Management and Tourism services" containing 228 cases and within this Marketing, containing 9 cases. Commerce, Management and Tourism services also include a B&M category with 167 cases. So rather confusingly, within the overall B&M UoA there is a sub-category called B&M, covering areas such as Human Resource Management, Operations Management, Organisation Studies, Strategy and some other subjects (Hughes, Webber, & O'Regan, 2017).

Table 2 lists the nine impact case studies classified as Marketing. Four mainly relate to practice, four mainly to policy impacts and one, "Improving the lives of ageing consumers through products and service innovation", could be said to have both policy and practice impact.

This is a low number for a subject so widely represented in B&M departments—Marketing represents just 2.2% of the 410 cases in the B&M UoA, compared with, say, the 153 cases

**Table 1. Impact cases in B&M UoA**

| Number of cases classified as: | Number of cases |
|---|---|
| Business & Management UoA | 410 |
| Sub-category classified as: Commerce, Management and Tourism services | 228 |
| Sub-category classified as: Marketing | 9 |
| Sub-category classified as: Business & Management | 167* |

*Hughes et al. (2017) also found 4 more cases studies that could have been classified as Marketing within the Business & Management sub-category.

**Table 2. Impact cases classified as marketing in REF 2014**

| Case | Practice | Policy | Type of impact |
|---|---|---|---|
| (1) Telstra switching study | x | | Marketing strategy for a company |
| (2) Influencing policy on alcohol marketing to young people | | x | Social policy |
| (3) Digital Signage for shopping malls & retail stores | x | | Technology & advertising |
| (4) Improving consumer decisions & outcomes through regulatory decisions | | x | Consumer behaviour & regulation |
| (5) Improving lives of ageing consumers through products & service innovation | x | x | Social policy |
| (6) Measuring the power of emotion in advertising | x | | Advertising |
| (7) Shaping town-centre policy & strategy through consumer-based research | | x | Social policy & town planning |
| (8) Sustainable growth for farming & small food businesses through use of consumer insight | x | | Marketing practice |
| (9) Young people & alcohol policy: informing a critical evidence-based debate that challenges popular stereotypes | | x | Social policy |

classified as Economics. This should be of concern to marketing academics. It prompted the authors to write this article. In the next section, we review the content of leading marketing journals and the role of journals in research impact.

It is also worth noting that only three of these cases (numbers 1, 3 and 6) related purely to commercial marketing, with the others relating primarily to social policy or regulatory matters. Of course, it is true that marketers have become increasingly and productively involved in such matters, partly due the focus on behavioural economics and the benefits of using marketing techniques to “nudge” citizens to make the “correct” decisions, but that is neither the primary activity of marketers nor the central focus of marketing teaching.

## 6. Journal review

We now turn to the question as to whether the lack of relevance apparently demonstrated by REF14 is reflected elsewhere, by analysing the situation in leading marketing journals.

The leading marketing journals are significant because academics are expected to show that they can publish in these journals (Seggie & Griffith, 2009). This is a contentious issue as there are still a hard core of academics even in top universities (the Russell Group) who choose not to publish, but do teaching, administration and mentoring of students—hence the debate in universities as to what to do with those who do not publish. We chose marketing journals rated 4 and 4* in the Association of Business Schools (ABS) list––to represent leading journals. While all articles submitted for the REF are reviewed and rated on their own merits, the ABS list is often used as a proxy measure of quality in UK Business Schools, and as a target and method of assessment for staff. Table 3 shows the description of each journal from their website.

Most journals state the aim of reaching practitioners as well as academics. The Journal of Marketing states that its target market is “thoughtful marketing academicians and practitioners”. The Journal of Marketing Research is aimed at “technically oriented research analysts, educators, and statisticians”. Marketing Science seeks “to reach a diverse audience well beyond academics in quantitative marketing”. International Journal of Research in Marketing targets “marketing scholars, practitioners (e.g., marketing research and consulting professionals) and other interested groups and individuals”. The Journal of Retailing does not state its target readership but is concerned with “application with respect to all aspects of retailing, its management, evolution, and current theory”. The Journal of Marketing Science “serves as a vital link between scholarly research and practice”. Two of the journals (Journal of Consumer Psychology and Journal of Consumer Psychology) do not make a claim to reach practitioners.

The authors analysed articles published in these leading journals in the 12 months to October 2017—a total of 431 articles. We focused on the content of the articles in relation to their relevance to different groups of marketing practitioners and also in the contexts covered. Our analysis showed that the nearly all articles contained information of potential use to different practitioners. Table 4 lists the practitioners to whom there were articles of potential interest.

Our analysis suggests that articles published in leading journals do cover information of relevance to different practitioners, but the low level of impact case studies in REF 2014a suggest that either that little of this research is having a direct influence on practice or that the methodology for assessing practical impact is imperfect in the case of marketing. This raises key questions:

- Why does publishing in academic journals have limited direct influence on practice?
- How can marketing academics influence practice more directly?

## 7. Why does publishing in academic journals have limited direct influence on practice?

Despite the claims of many of the journals to reach practitioners, evidence suggests that journal publication has little direct influence on practice. Few marketing practitioners read marketing journals (Ankers & Brennan, 2002; Crosier, 2004; Gray, Ottesan, & Matear, 2005). First and foremost, journal articles are written in a style that is challenging to read for non-academics. Most practitioners do not have the time or culture of referring to journals to find something that might be relevant/actionable. While many journal articles have a section on managerial implications, this section is often the weakest part of an article because it can be difficult for an academic to understand and write about the implications if they are not engaged with practising managers in discussions about the research. The result is often recommendations that are weak, e.g., “practitioners should pay more attention to this area” and unspecific.

It is possible that the practical impact takes place through other channels than journal publication, more in the case of marketing than in other disciplines, but this would need researching. While our analysis suggests that articles in leading journals do cover subjects of

**Table 3. Journal descriptions and number of articles published in the 12 months to October 2017**

| Journal and description | No. of articles |
|---|---|
| *Journal of Consumer Psychology* | 51 |
| "….publishes top-quality research articles that contribute both theoretically and empirically to our understanding of the psychology of consumer behavior." | |
| *Journal of Consumer Psychology* | 73 |
| "….publishes scholarly research that describes and explains consumer behavior. Empirical, theoretical, and methodological articles spanning fields such as psychology, marketing, sociology, economics, communications, and anthropology are featured in this interdisciplinary journal. The primary thrust of JCR is academic, rather than managerial, with topics ranging from micro-level processes (such as brand choice) to more macro-level issues (such as the development of materialistic values)." | |
| *Journal of Marketing* | 46 |
| "… editorial objectives… are (1) to advance the science and practice of marketing (to make a difference by adding to what we know about marketing phenomena and changing how we study and practice marketing) and (2) to serve as a bridge between the scholarly and the practical, each of which has a vital stake in what's happening on the other side. The target audience …. are thoughtful marketing academicians and practitioners. The word 'thoughtful' in the statement of target audience has important implications. It implies that the reader, whether academician or practitioner, is knowledgeable about the state of the art of the topic areas covered in JM." | |
| *Journal of Marketing Research* | 60 |
| "Journal of Marketing Research concentrates on the subject of marketing research, from its philosophy, concepts, and theories to its methods, techniques, and applications. This bimonthly, peer-reviewed journal is published for technically oriented research analysts, educators, and statisticians." | |
| *Marketing Science* | 51 |
| "…. an Institute for Operations Research and the Management Sciences (INFORMS) publication (SSCI indexed). We invite authors to submit for peer review their best marketing-oriented research. We accept many types of manuscripts. Please consider us as an author-friendly outlet for your research. We are THE premier journal focusing on empirical and theoretical quantitative research in marketing. Ultimately, we seek to reach a diverse audience well beyond academics in quantitative marketing. It is unnecessary, however, for every article to reach a diverse audience. However, in evaluating individual manuscripts, we will consider the ultimate audience for the article (e.g., marketing managers, general managers, public policy makers, regulators, consumers, consultants, market research professionals, other disciplines, etc.) and require evidence that the research can impact at least that audience." | |
| *International Journal of Research in Marketing* | 62 |
| "…. aims to contribute substantially to the field of marketing research by providing a high-quality medium for the dissemination of new marketing knowledge and methods. Among IJRM's targeted audience are marketing scholars, practitioners (e.g., marketing research and consulting professionals) and other interested groups and individuals." | |
| *Journal of Retailing* | 34 |
| "…. devoted to advancing the state of knowledge and its application with respect to all aspects of retailing, its management, evolution, and current theory. The field of retailing includes both products and services, the supply chains and distribution channels that serve retailers, the relationships between retailers and members of the supply channel, and all forms of direct marketing and emerging electric markets to households." | |
| *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* | 54 |
| "…. devoted to the study and improvement of marketing and serves as a vital link between scholarly research and practice by publishing research-based articles in the substantive domain of marketing. Manuscripts submitted for publication consideration in JAMS are judged on the basis of their potential contribution to the advancement of the science and/or practice of marketing." | |
| Total | 431 |

**Table 4. Practitioners who might be interested in material from articles**

| |
|---|
| Expert/specialist in consumer behaviour perhaps in large agency/consultancy/market research |
| Marketing directors/managers |
| Customer management |
| Data analytics specialists |
| Marketing communications management |
| Brand management |
| Sales management |
| Digital marketing specialists |
| Providers of marketing systems and data, whether internal or external |
| Corporate communications specialists |
| Public relations specialists |

potential interest to practitioners, the question remains as to whether they are covering the questions of contemporary importance to marketing managers.

One problem relates to the nature of academic articles. The focus on narrow research questions and the search for generalisability leads to a common formula—take a concept, narrow it to make it researchable, find a sample—often not representative of any market—which is researchable, and produce conclusions which are only valid for that sample, but which the researchers try to generalise. They are forced to do this because of the methodological emphasis of many, though not all, journal editors.

In informal discussions between the authors and editors of several journals, it has emerged that some marketing journals are trying to break away from this paradigm, to include articles which might be classified as "thought leadership" or indeed theoretical innovation, but the journals may be hampered in this process by lack of appropriate expertise on editorial boards to judge the value of such articles, though several now have editorial boards with significant numbers of practitioners,

Academic journals are in competition with many other sources of influence and information for the attention of time-poor practitioners, particularly the growing volumes of content provided by the many types of companies trying to influence them, e.g., management consultants, marketing agencies, marketing systems and data providers (Ankers & Brennan, 2002; Crosier, 2004; Piercy, 2002), so it is unsurprising that practitioners may not spend time looking for relevant academic work. While journals may be an important route to sharing research among marketing academics, they may not be the best route to widening the impact of academic research on marketing management.

A final issue which one of the authors has focused on is whether the journals' practice of focusing on citations by other academics as evidence of impact, and of ranking agencies using resulting "impact" factors as contributor to their ranking of journals is leading to an incestuous cycle which is becoming increasingly detached from the reality of business (Stone, Spero, & Aravopoulou, 2017b)

## 8. How can marketing academics influence practice more directly?

So, what can academics do to influence practice more directly? One option is to take their research out to practice, even integrate it with practice. This involves identifying to whom it might be relevant, promoting their work in general, and creating a dialogue, from which research projects may be defined or finding ways to use previous research done by the initiating academics or indeed other academics.

One of the keys to impact is understanding a particular role in the organization and selecting a specific "route to impact" for executives in that role (Jaworski, 2011). This means that integrating research and impact depends on identifying the practitioner community, as Hughes, Bence, Grisoni, O'Regan, and Wornham (2012, pp104) suggest: "What is needed is a debate on how marketing academia can more effectively engage with the wider field of marketing practice, for example managers involved in customer service; customer relationship management; sales and key account management, to name but a few. This may also require some consideration of the marketing field's overlapping areas of interest with certain sectors such as technology, innovation, entrepreneurship and others. Also, consideration of the different contexts in which aspects of marketing are practised, such as smaller businesses (SMEs), family businesses, not-for-profit organisations and the public sector".

Integrating research and practice has the added benefit that the "customers" for the research may also be its funders. It also has the advantage that the research is fully funded by clients, so that perhaps paradoxically it should not require public funding. In the remainder of this article, we provide three case studies of how research and impact can be integrated.

## 9. Integrating research and practice: case studies

### *9.1. Case 1 marketing agencies and their clients' research*

Tim Hughes and Mario Vafeas have been researching various aspects of how marketing agencies co-create with clients. The results have been published in the conventional way through academic conferences and academic journals (Hughes & Vafeas, 2014, 2015, 2017; Hughes, Vafeas, & Hilton, 2018; Vafeas & Hughes, 2016; Vafeas, Hughes, & Hilton, 2016). However, Hughes and Vafeas were keen to take their research findings more directly to practitioners. The first step was to identify groups of practitioners who might be interested in the results. In this case the target practitioners were obvious—the marketing agency professionals, particularly those on the client facing side of the business and clients working with agencies. Table 5 summarises the engagements with practice in sharing and discussing the research results:

The route to engaging with practice was through professional practitioner networks, as they have established channels for communicating with their members and have firmly established relationships. The professional networks promoted and endorsed the events and gained good numbers of participants. For the professional network, the benefit was that they were providing access to relevant and leading-edge research relating to their members' needs.

The first three workshops run with Bristol Media and Chartered Institute of Marketing were paid for events and were financially self-sustaining. The June 2017 workshop with Bristol Media was also a paid for event. The presentation events all fitted into regular meetings that professional associations put on for their members. During these presentations, Hughes and Vafeas offered to work with individual agencies and this resulted in individual agency workshops, running between January 2015 and October 2017. In total, the events led to engagement with 525 practitioners in sharing the research and discussing the implications for practice.

It is not easy to demonstrate that engagement with practice leads to impact because of the practical difficulties in attributing cause and effect. The numbers of practitioners attracted to the workshops and presentations suggests a high level of interest in the research subject area. A proviso to this is that it proved much easier to attract agency practitioners than client practitioners. This may be that the subject is perceived to be key to the future success of agencies, but is less of a priority to clients, who may feel that they can change their agency if things go wrong. Feedback from the workshops provided evidence of what the participants thought were important and evidence of intention to make changes in practice, as a result of the research. The workshops

**Table 5. Engagement with practice in sharing research results**

| Event | Timing | Collaborator(s) | Participants |
|---|---|---|---|
| Series of three workshops based on original dyadic client agency research | July to November 2014 | Bristol Media and Chartered Institute of Marketing | 103 agency & client practitioners |
| Presentation at Bristol Media Masterclass. Based on original research a feedback from first three workshops. | July 2015 | Bristol Media | 84 agency practitioners |
| Presentation at Bath & Bristol Marketing Network (Bath). Based on original research a feedback from first three workshops. | September 2015 | Bath & Bristol Marketing Network | 30 agency & client practitioners |
| Presentation at Bath & Bristol Marketing Network (Bristol) event. Based on original research a feedback from first three workshops. | September 2016 | Bath & Bristol Marketing Network | 50 agency & client practitioners |
| Presentation at Design Business Association breakfast meeting (London). Based on original research a feedback from first three workshops | February 2017 | Design Business Association | 50 agency & client practitioners |
| Presentation/discussion sessions at Business West/Bristol Media breakfast meeting. Based on further stage of client research. | May 2017 | Bristol Media and Business West | 25 agency & client practitioners |
| Workshop based on further stage of client research | June 2017 | Bristol Media | 54 agency practitioners |
| Presentation and discussion at Direct Marketing Association evening event. Based on further stage of client research. | September 2017 | Direct Marketing Association | 17 agency practitioners |
| Nine separate workshops with individual agencies and follow-up with each agency. | August 2015–October 2017 | Individual agencies | 112 agency practitioners |
| Total number of practitioners engaged across all events | | | 525 |

with individual agencies provided the opportunity to revisit many of the agencies to get feedback on change that had been made, following the initial workshops.

Hughes and Vafeas have systematically collected this evidence with a view to compiling an Impact Case Study for REF 2021. It will be interesting to see whether this is accepted and if so how it is rated. It represents only one approach to the engagement of industry in research. One interesting aspect is the difference in engagement between the agencies and the clients. However, this may be partly because in the authors' experiences, agencies and other third parties (such as management consultancies) are increasingly asked by clients to take on roles relating to determining the direction of marketing strategy (either overall or for areas such as marketing communications, particularly digital marketing and customer insight). Therefore, they are more "thirsty" for engagement with academics whose thinking might be useful.

### 9.2. Case study 2 using published research to support marketing strategy and training

Merlin Stone's career has over 40 years combined academic teaching and research work with industrial consultancy and training. His projects range from advising on marketing strategy, helping implement new directions in marketing, providing thought leadership content for B2B marketers to use with their clients and for public relations work, and marketing and sales training. Because of his familiarity with the academic literature, this is always one of the first starting points for work in all these categories, to identify whether academics (not just in marketing) can make a useful contribution to the work in which he is involved. In some cases, the thought leadership output is documented later as an academic publication. In other cases, the article is written as part of a review process, to bring together thinking from many different academic and commercial areas, to develop new concepts or adapt existing ones for use in consultancy and other projects.

Recent examples of work of this kind are given in Table 6.

The authors' relationships with senior marketing academics around the world has enabled them to identify many other examples of such work, visible in the "white papers" or thought leadership articles published by academics with commercial sponsorship, so it is clear that this phenomenon is not confined to your present authors.

The impact of this kind of approach varies according to the use made of the subsequent material by the client, and so might not be easy to measure by current methods. However, given that measurement of impact in this area is largely dependent on evidence supplied by the commercial client for this work, it would not be hard to devise a measurement process, perhaps using predefined criteria concerning use of the work.

### 9.3. Case study 3: using research to support the development of industrial training material

Another way to apply academic research is in development of industrial training programmes, in this case, a programme run by Customer Essential Ltd. (https://www.customeressential.com/), involving two of the authors of this article, for training key account managers, with the aim of transforming key account managers into managing directors of accounts. The programme included research, training, events and projects supported by mentoring with the objective of rapidly improving the leadership skills and performance of key account managers at Royal and Sun Alliance Insurance, in their management of their intermediated insurance customers—retailers, banks and others—who resold the company's insurance. Royal and Sun Alliance's B2B relationships were strong, but the company wanted to strengthen and develop

**Table 6. Examples of academic marketing research applied in recent articles different ways**

| Thought leadership work subsequently published as an academic article | Consultancy work subsequently published as an academic article | Review process to generate/adapt concepts |
|---|---|---|
| Stott, Stone, and Fae (2016) | Stone and Laughlin (2016) | Stone et al. (2017a) |
| Stone (2012) | Stone (2014) | Parnell, Stone, Stott, Aravopoulou, and Timms (2017) |
| Stone (2011b) | Stone and Woodcock (2013) | Stone and Woodcock (2014) |
| Stone (2009) | Stone (2011a) | Stone (2016) |

these relationships, with the aim of becoming the "most trusted and admired partnership business in UK Financial Services".

Previously published academic research, in marketing, sales, strategy and organisational development, was used at every stage of the design and delivery of the programme, to provide the conceptual foundation of the programme. Consultancy practice, documented in commercial research (Dalglish, 2016), had demonstrated the existence of a gap in strategic and leadership skills in B2B customer management, leading to focus on short-term outcomes and tactical account activity, with little long-term impact on the strategic relationship between suppliers and clients and therefore lower impact for both the organisations involved.

Many customer management assessments and research papers (Stone, Gamble, Woodcock, & Foss, 2006) have highlighted "leadership buy-in", "continuity", "engagement", "clarity of strategy" as central to the delivery of successful customer strategies. For many organisations, resulting programmes of activity have been focused on communicating and selling programmes of activity to leaders, rather than focusing on the leaders themselves, which was therefore adopted as the aim of the training programme, which involved the creation of an academy, designed to unlock the leadership potential of leaders of the account management teams.

The consultants of Customer Essential used analysis of each account director's situation, their consultants' experience of success in other customer management leadership situations, and research into the success factors of strong and successful leaders, particularly in innovation (Miller, Klokgieters, Brankovic, & Duppen, 2012), to identify five key that were required to take leadership to the required level:

(1) Thinking like a CEO—recognising different leadership styles, unlocking the thinking styles and approach of the account directors and managers involved. Enabling them to broaden their horizons and consider the challenges of their market and customers from all angles, and set their own vision for the future.
(2) Cross-functional leadership—formally recognising the challenge of operating and communicating across functions/matrix and cultures, building stories and communicating in different ways to engage, taking on board and channelling feedback from the team, building effective teamwork.
(3) Strategic leadership—providing a more inspiring future for their customers, understanding key levers to pull to address the issues they face, taking control of their own targets and plans.
(4) Innovation—using strategies and tools to create new ideas, understanding how to channel insight into new propositions or changes, creating an approach to innovating with their customers.
(5) Delivering partnerships—business for business—understanding what partnership means, understanding where they are with their customers, what it takes to influence NPS/satisfaction, building joint goals, influencing relationships and stakeholders, driving change.

Literally hundreds of academic sources were consulted for each of the above areas, so it would be inappropriate to cite them—further details can be obtained from Customer Essential.

The design principles of the programme were as follows:

- Ensure a strong research base—review of publications and business articles—many academic and grey literature sources on customer relationship management, leadership, account management and sales training were consulted
- Focus on tangible outcomes for business and individuals
- Incorporate the programme into the business strategy and calendar

- Ensure events/face-to-face sessions were maximised with targeted, short content and reality-based working sessions
- Provide real and relevant customer and internal research into the programme
- Ensure that there was a preparation, event, follow up and link to next stage in each phase of the project
- Ensuring all material was published, memorable and interesting.
- Provide individual mentoring/coaching for each participant
- Link in other training and knowledge material to the schedule
- Gain accreditation for the programme

A learning journey was created by Customer Essential for the participants, linked to a skills development programme created through online/webinar and lunchtime sessions. There were individual and business-related deliverables at each stage of the programme, with the option (taken by two participants) of progressing to a Master's degree in sales management at the University of Portsmouth, with their work on the course being used to gain credits through an Accreditation of Prior Experience and Learning initiative, others may follow.

The programme's main objective was success with customers. In the first year of the programme, RSA saw big improvements in their clients' Net Promoter Scores across their clients—more than 30 points. In total, 80% of their partners were extremely happy with their account managers. More than 40% of customers were active promoters of the company. Many participants in the programme were promoted or took on exciting projects for the business. The approach of embedding the learning firmly in the company's requirement to be market leaders in account management ensured that individuals applied their learning and thinking to their work. Partnership between the consultant responsible for programme design and one of the authors as academic lead proved to be a critical factor in the success of the programme.

This focused programme was developed because, before contracting with Customer Essential, the consultant, Royal and Sun Alliance had rejected the option of generic key account training from a source at a university or for the individuals to be trained by taking their own individual Masters courses, due to lack of focus and lack of link with the company's business priorities. Programmes in which individuals work independently of the company can lead to a high attrition rate. The company's own research led them to discount the option for individuals to study for their own degrees due to the lack of focus and the risk of a weak link to the company's business priorities. As a result, a high percentage of the talented team stayed with the company, in a situation where it is difficult to retain the most talented and where education and training programmes which work independently often encourage them to leave.

The impact of this type of approach could be formally evaluated in the REF by modifying the assessment process to include not just the academic's own research but that of other academics. The funding resulting from this impact might then be split rather as authors' royalties are split, perhaps using the services of the Authors Licensing and Collecting Society.

## 10. Conclusions and further research

Achieving wider impact from academic research is a global policy issue (Dowling Review of Business-University Collaborations, 2015; LERU—League of European Research Universities, 2012; Watson, Hollister, Stroud, & Babcock, 2011; Wilson, 2012; Witty, 2013). It raises questions about the role of an academic and where they invest their effort. Evaluating the overall impact of research is challenging because impact comes in many forms (Martin, 2011). However, the system for assessment must be workable and equitable and therefore rules-based. A further challenge is that generally the number of academic researchers willing or able to demonstrate impact is small (Watermeyer, 2014b), while there has been little engagement of research evaluation specialists with the academic community (Donovan, 2011). For non-science subjects, a problem has been a focus in the past on commercialization of ideas and technology transfer, ignoring other academic interactions with external organisations (Hughes & Kitson, 2012).

This article tries to explain the complexity of impact across the range of academic research (Bornmann, 2013). But how far do the impact case studies in the REF tell story of academic impact and how far are they about game playing and the way the story is told (Watermeyer, 2014a)? This is important because the behaviour and culture of academics will be driven by the REF and other such exercises. As long as publication, particularly in certain types of journals, is still prioritized over engagement with practice, it is a publication in these journals that will still be the main focus of academics' attention. So, the problem identified by Lilien (2016), in this case of lack of B2B marketing research because of the domination of the quantitative/positivist model, will persist.

In our view, in an applied field such as marketing, far greater attention to engaging in a sustained and ideally integrated way with the field of practice is required. This can be done in many ways, for example through industry associations, management and broad interest publications and through consulting companies and associated publications. However this activity is not recognised unless it is within the model of application suggested by the impact case study approach of the REF (Snowden, 2003). It is not clear to the authors why this rather narrow interpretation was adopted. This opens the possibility that there are two distinct and completely opposite reasons for the low number of marketing impact case studies in the 2014 REF. One is that marketing academic are poorly engaged with practice. The other is that their mode of engagement is very different from that envisaged by the REF, as shown in the examples given in this article, implying that the REF model is inadequate for marketing and possibly for other management disciplines. The latter is a topic that clearly needs more research.

The over-reliance on academic publication as a metric is said to have skewed the work of academics in management fields away from practice (Adler & Harzing, 2009). The inclusion of impact cases in REF 2014a was designed to redress this by requiring demonstration of wider impact, but our evidence suggests this is not enough. For an applied subject like marketing, we would like to see a requirement to submit fewer academic publications, but more evidence from individual academics and teams of academics on how they have engaged outside of academia to disseminate their research findings and on how this activity has had an impact. This might also help marketing teach their students using more applied material, perhaps enhancing the employability of marketing students (a topic worthy of separate research) and greater satisfaction of employers with the output of universities.

It is clearly understood by the authors that the assessment of impact by the REF is at its earliest stages, and that those involved—both researchers and assessors—are on a steep learning curve. The REF is more than a database of research achievements, capabilities and impact. It is in its fullest sense a B2B or inter-organisational information platform (Stone et al., 2017a), an important basis for the government as customer on behalf of the wider community—industry, citizens, students etc.—to determine who should be funded and by how much. It has much in common with other platforms used in the public sector to validate suppliers, such as the university's own JISC (https://www.jisc.ac.uk/), founded in 1993 as the Joint Information Systems Committee, which focuses on digital solutions for education and research, and Scape (www.scapegroup.co.uk/), which focuses on procurement for the built environment and is used by local authorities and other public-sector purchasers. Research into both these and comparison with the REF forms part of the (so far unpublished) work of one of your authors. The REF was founded as the Research Assessment Exercise in 1986 and Scape was founded in 2006. The REF seems to be a little behind the curve of the other two frameworks, at least as far as our research indicates, in that there is still some debate about what information should be included in the platform. The difference between REF and these two other platforms is that they start with a different question, how to improve value for money for the client, rather than the question the REF starts with, which is how to allocate funds between suppliers by evaluating the quality of their research. In the authors' view, the REF for the years beyond 2021 should begin with the former question, and therefore have much stronger participation of the clients, as do the other two frameworks. This of course raises the question as to who the final clients are and indeed what value they are seeking through which outcomes—the subject for more research.

Finally, there are also significant implications for the publishers of marketing journals, especially that they would do well to consider broadening the type of article published to include one or more practical articles in each issue, and finding new ways of disseminating business-friendly versions of the more academic articles.

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**Group research activities**
This article is produced by a group of researchers who have a strong interest in ensuring the practical application of academic research into marketing. The disciplines which are the foundation of much of their published research include qualitative marketing research, marketing communications, business-to-business marketing, customer relationship management, marketing information management and digital marketing. They have significant track records of engagement and employment in industry and of generating thought leadership, whether in disciplines or different sectors of industry. They are passionate about the student experience and about the employability of their students, about engaging industry in academia and vice versa. Their involvement in industry in not purely strategic, like that of many marketing academics, but also deeply operational, and so they stand or fall by the relevance of the work that they do, not just in producing theories and ideas, but also in helping industry deal with its practical problems and opportunities.

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