

# Guidelines for Conducting Research and Publishing in Marketing: From Conceptualization Through the Review Process

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*A primary mission of institutions of higher learning is the generation and dissemination of knowledge. The low acceptance rates at the leading research journals in marketing, typically in the single digits to low teens, suggests the need to increase the quality of the research manuscripts produced. This article presents a set of guidelines for researchers aspiring to do scholarly research in marketing. Discussed are issues such as developing the necessary research skills, conceptualizing the study, constructing the research design, writing the manuscript, and responding to reviewers. Also presented are the author's personal observations concerning the current state of research in marketing.*

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This article is intended for doctoral students and those researchers who are beginning or are early in their careers and would like to increase their journal acceptance rates. The experienced author with several major publications and years of reviewing experience will find little, if anything, "new" to them. What follows are the author's reflections on more than a quarter century of guiding doctoral students and reviewing for, and publishing in, some of the leading journals in marketing. The author's remarks primarily relate to research that involves the collection and analysis of primary data (e.g., case studies, surveys, and experiments). Not addressed are such things as review papers, theory development not based on empirical research, and quantitative marketing models.

## Manuscript Acceptance Rates at Leading Marketing Journals: From Single Digit to Low Teens

The acceptance rate at the leading research journals is currently averaging around 10 percent. Because editors are limited in the number of pages they can have in each issue, a journal's acceptance rate is constrained by the number of manuscripts submitted and the average length of the manuscripts accepted. Hence, as the overall quality of the manuscripts received by a journal increases over time, its standards for acceptance also rise.

For most top journals, there isn't a dramatic drop in quality between the top 10 percent of manuscripts received and the next best 10 percent, and most of the manuscripts submitted to the leading journals are reasonably well-done. About 80 percent of the manuscripts submitted are rejected on the initial round of reviews. There are several basic reasons for rejecting manuscripts reporting on empirical studies. These include the following:

1. The research questions being investigated are not very interesting (e.g., studies that are mainly descriptive and lack theoretical implications).
2. The research, although well executed, does not appear to make a sufficiently large contribution to the literature (e.g., the study largely replicates past research with minor modifications).
3. The conceptual framework is not well developed (e.g., lacks precise conceptual definitions of the constructs and/or compelling theoretical rationale for the hypotheses).
4. The methodology is seriously flawed (e.g., the sample is inappropriate for the research question, the validity of one or more key measures is

suspect, and/or the experiment lacks experimental realism).

5. The writing is so confused that an invitation to revise and resubmit is considered unlikely to result in an acceptable manuscript.

For a detailed discussion of the weaknesses in manuscripts cited by the reviewers of one leading journal along with some guideposts for authors, see Varadarajan (1996).

To be published in a respected peer-reviewed journal, a study must be judged as meeting the currently accepted standards for scholarly research. Moreover, the study must be judged as more worthy than others competing for the same journal space. What should researchers do to increase the chances that their studies will make a significant contribution to marketing knowledge and be among those that are eventually published by one of the leading research journals? Answering this question is the major focus of this article.

## **SCHOLARLY RESEARCH ON SUBSTANTIVE ISSUES IN MARKETING**

This section presents a set of 12 guidelines for researchers aspiring to do scholarly research in marketing. These guidelines deal with developing the necessary set of research skills and the research process.

### **Develop a Broad Set of Methodological Skills**

Developing a broad set of methodological skills (e.g., qualitative research methods, survey research methodology, and experimental design) is critical to becoming a productive researcher. Those with a limited set of methodological tools are restricted in what they can study and what they can learn from their research. For example, someone with weak or no training in qualitative research methods is very limited with regard to developing grounded theory in his or her research area of interest, and researchers without a background in experimental design are likely to use surveys to test causal hypotheses. Developing a broad set of methodological skills early in one's career provides long-term benefits because one can rely on this same set of skills for many years. Many of the research techniques used today were developed several decades ago. For example, much of the most important work on reliability and validity was published during the 1950s and 1960s.

### **Learn to Be a Critical Reader of the Literature**

It is important to become practiced in reading the literature in a critical manner. When researchers take an

“accepting point of view” in reading the literature and focus on the conclusions of these studies, it will seem to them as if everything has been done, and they will feel disappointed that they had not thought to do these studies first. It is only when researchers look for flaws and/or limitations in the research they read that they begin to develop ideas for building on this research. For example, with regard to the conceptual framework, readers should concern themselves with whether the conceptual definitions are sufficiently unambiguous and whether the theoretical rationale provided for each of the hypotheses is convincing. With regard to survey research methodology, they might consider whether there is a serious problem with shared method variance and/or whether the measures used validly capture the constructs of interest. The limitations identified in existing research alert the researcher to opportunities for making contributions to the research area of interest.

### **Focus on Developing Hypotheses to Be Tested**

As researchers start reading the literature, it is important that they begin thinking about identifying the hypotheses they might want to test. This will help them develop some structure for their conceptual frameworks and construct boundaries for their empirical studies. This, in turn, will allow them to determine which articles in their general area of interest are most central to the empirical study they plan to design. In deciding what hypotheses to investigate in the empirical study, thought should be given to the potential contribution to the literature and the feasibility of developing a rigorous research design for testing them. Researchers who fail to focus on developing hypotheses as they review the literature often end up spending many months or even a year reading the literature without having identified a single hypothesis they want to test.

### **Use the Literature to Stimulate Your Thinking**

It is critical that the existing literature be used to stimulate one's thinking beyond that of merely understanding what is covered in each of the individual articles reviewed. In this regard, researchers need to consider such things as why different studies may have produced what seem to be conflicting results and what overall inferences one can draw from the studies as a group. They also should concern themselves with how existing conceptual frameworks might be improved. For example, have previous researchers overlooked important antecedents or consequences? Have past studies failed to consider potential mediators or moderators? Researchers must avoid allowing the literature to constrain their thinking. One aid for doing this is for researchers to constantly ask themselves what they

personally believe about the phenomenon of interest. These are issues that researchers should concern themselves with *as they are reviewing the literature* rather than only after all of the literature has been read.

### Put It on Paper

Researchers should write down their ideas as they occur to them and maintain a file. Failure to immediately commit one's ideas to paper means that time will be wasted trying to rediscover old ideas, and some ideas may be lost forever. The mere act of writing down their ideas often makes researchers more aware of ambiguities in their thinking. Frequently, arguments that seem so clear in their heads become unraveled when they write these down. This permits researchers to identify the problems in their current thinking and work to resolve them. Finally, committing one's thoughts to writing makes it much easier to get constructive feedback from others.

### Don't Work in Isolation

It is difficult for most researchers to conceptualize a tight research study without interacting with others, if for no other reason than that it is difficult for people to evaluate their own work. This is particularly true for less-experienced researchers. Doctoral students who have infrequent interaction with their dissertation committees almost always take a long time to complete their dissertations. It is often the case that researchers clarify their own thoughts, identify problems with their conceptual framework, and discover new ideas solely as a result of communicating their current thinking to others. The mere process of orally explaining their thoughts to others forces researchers to examine their ideas more deeply. Hence, it is almost always a mistake for researchers to wait until they feel their conceptual frameworks are very well developed before exposing them to others. Although almost anyone willing to listen and read what has been written can be helpful, particularly valuable are those who constantly ask for clarification and question the researcher's assumptions, conceptual definitions, and theoretical rationale. These interactions are especially beneficial when researchers have previously committed their ideas to writing.

### Develop Precise Conceptual Definitions for the Constructs

The conceptual definitions of the constructs of interest warrant special attention. Constructs are the building blocks of theory. Without well-developed conceptual definitions for the constructs, it is impossible to develop a coherent theory. For example, we cannot develop a

meaningful theoretical rationale for why Construct A should be related to Construct B if the exact meaning of each of these two constructs has not been established. Moreover, it is impossible to develop a valid measure of a construct that is not precisely defined.

Avoid developing pseudodefinitions. Some authors will talk about some Construct A being a result of or the cause of some other Construct B. However, one cannot define a construct in terms of its antecedents or its consequences. Moreover, trying to do so means that the proposed theoretical linkage between A and B would not be empirically testable (i.e., it could not be falsified); rather, it would be true by definition. Another type of pseudodefinition one finds in the literature involves merely giving examples of what is included in a construct (e.g., Construct A includes such things as . . .). These pseudodefinitions invariably provide an incomplete listing of the construct's content and fail to indicate what is not included in the construct. The central role of constructs requires that researchers make reasonably certain that their constructs are well defined before moving on to other aspects of their conceptual framework or to their research designs.

### Evaluate the Hypotheses

The hypotheses to be tested also need to be evaluated before designing the empirical study.

- Are the hypotheses clearly written?
- Is each of the hypotheses falsifiable?
- Do any of the hypotheses involve truism or tautologies?
- Are any of the hypotheses trivial in the sense that others would be likely to question the methodology of any study that reported negative results?
- Is the theoretical rationale provided for each hypothesis compelling?
- Are there any additional theoretical arguments that would strengthen the conceptual support for the hypotheses?
- Do the hypotheses to be tested represent a cohesive set?

It is important for researchers to aggressively solicit criticism of all aspects of their conceptual framework. It is only when continued exposure of the conceptual framework to criticism ceases to uncover serious flaws and all necessary revisions have been made that researchers should move to the design phase. The time to revise the conceptual framework is before the data are collected. After the data are collected, researchers are severely restricted by the available measures as to what changes they can make in their conceptual frameworks.

## Identify the Intended Contributions

At this point, it is important to make explicit the intended contributions of the study and to evaluate them. The contributions of a study can be conceptual, empirical, or methodological in nature. *Conceptual contributions* could involve such things as:

1. improved conceptual definitions of the original constructs;
2. the identification and conceptual definition of additional constructs to be added to the conceptual framework (e.g., additional dependent, independent, mediating, and/or moderator variables);
3. the development of additional theoretical linkages (i.e., research hypotheses) with their accompanying rationale; and
4. the development of improved theoretical rationale for existing linkages.

*Empirical contributions* would include such things as:

1. testing a theoretical linkage between two constructs that has not previously been tested,
2. examining the effects of a potential moderator variable on the nature of the relationship between two constructs,
3. determining the degree to which a variable mediates the relationship between two constructs, and
4. investigating the psychometric properties of an important scale.

When *field studies* are being used, *methodological contributions* might involve changes in the design of past studies that:

1. reduce the potential problems with shared method variance through the insightful use of multiple methods of measurement,
2. increase the generalizability of the research through more appropriate sampling procedures,
3. allow the investigation of the plausibility of "third-variable explanations" for the results of past studies, and/or
4. enhance the construct validity of key measures through the use of refined multiple-item measures and/or the use of measurement approaches that do not rely on self-reports.

With respect to *laboratory experiments*, *methodological contributions* might involve such things as modifications in the experimental procedures that serve to:

1. increase the internal, ecological, and/or external validity of the experiment;

2. improve the construct validity of the putative causes and effects (e.g., through the development of improved manipulations of the independent variables and/or the improvement of multiple-item scales for the dependent variables);
3. enhance statistical conclusion validity;
4. increase the experimental realism of the experiment; and/or
5. decrease the plausibility of demand artifacts.

Not infrequently, less-experienced researchers try to design their studies to contain many such contributions in an attempt to make certain that the overall contribution of their research will be sufficiently high. Pursuit of this approach is often associated with the risk of the researcher's time and effort getting so spread out among many tasks that every aspect of the study is poorly done. The important issue is not how many contributions a study will make but rather the *significance* of each contribution. One should be concerned with such things as the degree to which a proposed contribution fills some important gap in the literature. For example, a study could make a very substantial contribution by demonstrating that a previously unidentified moderator variable could explain what previously appeared to be conflicting results in past research. Feedback from successful researchers with a reputation for being candid is very helpful in pruning the list of intended contributions to those likely to have the greatest impact on the research area of interest.

## Designing the Empirical Study

When the conceptual framework has been set and the intended contributions of the study determined, it is time to consider the details of the research design. Although past research in an area can serve as a valuable guide, it is important to recognize that no study is without methodological shortcomings. One should always be cognizant of the methodological weaknesses and/or limitations of published research and attempt to overcome these limitations in one's own work. For example, to the degree that previous measures appear to lack content validity, consideration should be given to revising some of the items used in these scales and developing new items to add.

The time for researchers to get critical feedback on their research designs is before they collect their data. Although researchers can make some modifications to their conceptual frameworks (e.g., clarify conceptual definitions, provide additional theoretical rationale for some of the hypotheses) even while their manuscripts are under review at a research journal, nothing can be done to improve the research methodology once the data have been collected. Moreover, if the data are seriously flawed, no amount of rewriting of the manuscript can overcome this fact.

Experts on the particular research methods being used should be solicited to critique the research design *before* the data are collected. Moreover, they should be encouraged to be as critical and detailed as they are when reviewing manuscripts for a journal.

### Pretesting Questionnaires

A rigorous pretest of the questionnaire can almost always provide valuable information on how it might be improved. Unfortunately, many pretests are not very rigorous and only give the researcher a false sense of security. For example, when conducting a pretest of a questionnaire, many researchers will ask a small sample from the population of interest to complete the questionnaire and when they are finished ask them if they noticed any problems. If those in the pretest sample complete all items on the questionnaire and do not report any problems with any of the items, these researchers conclude that the questionnaire is without serious flaws. However, this conclusion is seldom justified. Participants often mark responses to the most confusing questionnaire items and never question what these items were intended to measure. When asked after completing a questionnaire whether any part of it was confusing, participants typically say little, if anything, even when many of the questions are confusingly worded. There are several plausible reasons for this situation. First, pretest participants may be constrained in the time and thought they are willing and able to devote to filling out questionnaires. Second, they may not be sufficiently skilled and/or experienced at detecting and articulating problems with questionnaire items. Finally, they may be reluctant to be critical, even when asked to.

Pretesting of the questionnaire is especially critical if new scales are being constructed or previous scales have been significantly revised. To determine what pretest participants really think about their questionnaires, researchers must be very aggressive in extracting this information. For example, as the pretest participants complete the questionnaire, the researcher might ask these participants whether they can think of more than one way to interpret what each item is asking and to report these interpretations. This should be done separately with each participant one question at a time. The researcher might also ask these participants to explain why they responded the way they did on each item. However, this approach will work only if the participants are perceptive and willing to devote a significant amount of time thinking about each item. One insightful and articulate pretest participant who is committed to providing constructive criticism is worth more than 20 reluctant pretest participants.

Whenever feasible, it is a good idea to use multiple-item scales because these scales are usually more reliable than single-item scales and their reliability can be easily

measured when the scales are reflective. When building multiple-item, reflective scales, it is useful to administer the questionnaire to a small sample (e.g., approximately 30 participants) after the initial pretest has been conducted and revisions made. This allows researchers to determine if their items are producing the anticipated pattern of correlations. When this pattern is not achieved, the sample correlation matrix can be used to identify problem items. These items can then be revised or discarded based on a careful analysis of the content of each item.

### Pretesting Experiments

Experiments involving human subjects are even more difficult to design and pretest than are surveys. When developing a new experimental design, it is critical that an extensive evaluation of the design be undertaken. In addition to pretesting the measures, researchers need to be concerned with whether (1) the experiment has a sufficient amount of experimental realism, (2) the experiment contains demand artifacts, (3) the manipulations provide the intended variance in the independent variables, and (4) the manipulations might be causing unintended variance in other variables that might have an impact on the dependent variables of interest. After evaluating their own initial experimental designs and making the necessary revisions, researchers should ask one or two individuals with special expertise in experimental design (e.g., those who routinely review manuscripts reporting experimental studies for the leading research journals) to examine their experimental designs and materials and to comment on what they feel the weaknesses of the designs might be. After revising their designs, researchers should recruit three or four insightful and articulate individuals to serve as initial pretest participants. These participants should be asked to provide a verbal protocol as they proceed through the experiment in a thoughtful manner. After all necessary revisions have been made, a pretest using participants from the population of interest should be conducted. The primary purpose of this pretest is to collect manipulation and confounding check measures. This will tell researchers whether their manipulations are working as planned. If the dependent variables are assessed during this pretest, they should be measured *after* the manipulation and confounding checks. Given a sufficient sample size for the pretest, it will not be necessary to include manipulation and confounding checks in the main experiment.

Unless a behavioral experiment largely replicates a past research design, failure to identify several significant problems in the initial design is reason for concern. It is rarely, if ever, the case that a newly developed research design does not contain several serious methodological problems. Hence, when the initial pretest does not reveal serious defects in the research design, the researcher

should strongly consider conducting a second, more rigorous pretest.

## CRAFTING MANUSCRIPTS FOR SCHOLARLY JOURNALS IN MARKETING

When researchers do an excellent job of conceptualizing their studies, developing and executing their research designs, and analyzing their data, the most difficult part of their work is behind them. Researchers need not be talented or creative writers to report the results of well-conceptualized and executed studies. They only need to be organized, accurate, and concise in their writing. All well-written manuscripts have three characteristics in common: (1) an introduction that "sells" the study; (2) tight logic, clarity, and conciseness throughout all sections; and (3) a creative and insightful Discussion and Conclusions section.

### Introduction—Selling the Study

To convince readers of the importance of their studies, authors need to accomplish the following four goals in the indicated order:

1. Establish the importance of the general area of interest.
2. Indicate in general terms what has been done in this broad area.
3. Identify important gaps, inconsistencies, and/or controversies in the relevant literature.
4. Provide a concise statement of the manuscript's purpose(s), the contributions the manuscript makes to the literature.

The contributions noted should relate back to the gaps, inconsistencies, and controversies identified earlier.

In establishing the importance of the general area of interest, one need not develop long and complicated arguments or discuss the detailed results of several articles. Establishing the importance of the topic area can often be accomplished rather quickly and easily as the following sample text suggests:

\_\_\_\_\_ researchers have devoted considerable attention to developing and testing models of \_\_\_\_\_ (e.g., cite several prominent articles in the area).<sup>1</sup>

Next, the author should indicate in general terms what has been done in the broad area. A lot of journal space need not be devoted to achieving this goal. It is not expected or desirable that authors report the detailed findings of individual studies. For example, consider the following sample text:

Previous research has addressed several aspects of \_\_\_\_\_: (1) \_\_\_\_\_ (cite two to three relevant articles), (2) \_\_\_\_\_ (cite two to three relevant articles), and (3) \_\_\_\_\_ (cite two to three relevant articles).

The results of the studies cited need not be reviewed when the current article focuses on different issues than those covered in the studies cited.

Then, researchers need to identify important gaps, inconsistencies, and/or controversies in the literature. This serves to establish the need for additional research in the topic area of interest. This task, like those that precede it, can be achieved in a concise manner. For example, consider the following sample text:

However, in addition, \_\_\_\_\_ encompasses several unexplored dimensions that lately have attracted research attention in other disciplines (cite two to three relevant articles).

Some of these unexplored \_\_\_\_\_ appear to be important and worthy of investigation in the context of \_\_\_\_\_.

An investigation of these issues is important because \_\_\_\_\_.

Furthermore, previous empirical research has focused primarily on \_\_\_\_\_. Very little research has been done on \_\_\_\_\_.

Finally, and most important, the researcher must provide a concise statement of the manuscript's purposes, the contributions the manuscript makes to the literature. This statement should follow logically from the text that identifies gaps, inconsistencies, and/or controversies in the literature. For example, consider the following sample text:

In this study we seek to extend \_\_\_\_\_ by addressing the gaps in \_\_\_\_\_. The study investigates the impact of four \_\_\_\_\_: (1) \_\_\_\_\_, (2) \_\_\_\_\_, (3) \_\_\_\_\_, and (4) \_\_\_\_\_. In addition, interrelationships among \_\_\_\_\_ are examined.

Researchers should avoid trying to develop a long list of contributions (conceptual, empirical, and methodological). Inevitably, several of these "contributions" will be of low importance and will divert the reader's attention from the major focus of the study. Researchers must make clear what *major* contributions their studies make and explain why these contributions are important. It is a mistake to assume that readers will decipher the importance of the study from a description of what was done. The failure to clearly specify the importance of the study in the introduction is often the result of not having given enough thought to this issue *before* the study was conducted.

## Writing Quality

Writing quality is often a reflection of the clarity of the author's thoughts. Overly vague ideas invariably lead to confused writing or the lack of any writing. It is generally the case that when authors have trouble writing, the problem lies primarily with the clarity of their thoughts as opposed to their ability to phrase their ideas properly. As such, authors should first question their understanding of what they want to communicate when they are having difficulty writing.

The manuscript must be clearly written, concise, and characterized by tight logic. When evaluating their own writing, authors will often ask themselves whether the text is consistent with their ideas. This is far too low a standard to use because it does little, if anything, to ensure that the reader will understand the author's message. Instead, one should adopt Stevenson's standard: "Don't write merely to be understood. Write so that you cannot possibly be misunderstood."

Authors need to ask themselves whether it is possible to derive either unintended meaning or no meaning at all from what they have written. The aggressive search for alternative interpretations of one's text is a key to identifying ambiguous and confusing passages.

Jargon, the specialized vocabulary of a discipline, can be useful by adding precision and conciseness to researchers' writings. However, it is frequently misused (overused) in an attempt to make a manuscript appear more sophisticated. Unfortunately, it typically achieves the opposite effect. All such terms should be defined where they first appear unless their meaning is (1) invariant and (2) well-known to most readers.

Conciseness in writing is a virtue, particularly when publishing in research journals. Since journal space is scarce and costly, the contribution-to-length ratio is an important consideration in a journal's decision as to whether or not to accept a manuscript for publication. While writing in a succinct manner can be a daunting task for first-time authors, examining particularly well-written articles in the target journal can be very helpful. For example, consider the following passages that deal with conceptual definitions, theoretical rationale for hypotheses, and research methodology:

*Conceptual definitions:* "\_\_\_\_\_ is defined as \_\_\_\_\_."

(If borrowed, cite the source.)

*Rationale for hypotheses:* "Considerable evidence from previous research suggests that \_\_\_\_\_." (Cite two to three

key articles.)

"Furthermore, \_\_\_\_\_ (cite "leading experts") argue that \_\_\_\_\_, they hypothesize \_\_\_\_\_."

*Research methodology:* "Data were obtained through self-administered questionnaires from \_\_\_\_\_ in three \_\_\_\_\_."

"A total of \_\_\_\_\_ usable responses were obtained for an overall response rate of \_\_\_\_\_."

"\_\_\_\_\_ was measured by an \_\_\_\_\_ item instrument based on the research of \_\_\_\_\_ (cite key article)."

Each of the above passages contains a lot of information while using very few words.

Another way to keep the length of a research manuscript reasonable is to be parsimonious in the use of references. Often, two or at most three well-chosen references will provide sufficient support for a position. Moreover, too many references may make the manuscript difficult to read.

Sections involving reviews of the literature deserve special attention. It is unsatisfactory to provide a series of summaries of individual studies when reviewing past research. These consume journal space without adding anything to our understanding of the literature. As Churchill and Perreault (1982) observe, a review should "advance the field by virtue of its insightful, integrative, and critical evaluation of the state of work in a subject area." A good review section will provide a *synthesis* of the literature and make clear what is "known" with a fair amount of certainty and where the gaps are.

## A Creative and Insightful Discussion and Conclusions Section

The Discussion and Conclusions section is the last thing readers see, and it can have a large impact on their impressions of the research being reported. This section should build on the Introduction section. In this regard, it needs to reaffirm the importance of the study by showing how the study reported fits into the literature (e.g., what gaps in the literature it fills). The study's contributions and their importance should be made clear by communicating the study's implications for theory and practice. To merely summarize the empirical results is an inappropriate strategy.

It is important to clearly distinguish between conclusions and speculation when writing the Discussion and Conclusions section. Conclusions must be clearly supported by the data. However, authors may have valuable, informed speculation to share. As Churchill and Perreault (1982) observe, "Good science and good 'speculation' are not incompatible, but each should be clearly labeled so that the two are not confused" (p. 286). A few interesting ideas can go a long way here. While the Discussion and Conclusions section should not be dominated by speculation, authors should identify new issues raised by the

study's findings and/or provide insightful (nonobvious) directions for future research.

### Self-Edit the Manuscript

The initial draft of even the most carefully prepared manuscript can always be significantly improved. As such, the initial draft should be revised prior to submitting the manuscript to others for their evaluation. It is difficult for authors to edit their own writing. In addition to the problem of being critical of one's own work, authors know what they wanted to communicate. This makes it difficult for them to notice ambiguities and omissions in their manuscripts. However, there are things writers can do to reduce these problems. Laying their manuscripts aside for a few weeks reduces writers' familiarity with their papers. This can help them develop a fresh perspective and be more open to changes. Another strategy involves analyzing the manuscript from the point of view of someone who knows little or nothing about the topic area. This would include such things as checking to see whether the specialized terms have been clearly defined and whether the logic underlying each of the arguments made and the positions taken are readily apparent. Finally, authors should ask themselves whether their students would be likely to understand most of what they have written. If not, the manuscript needs to be reworked.

### Solicit Critical Feedback Before Submission

"A colleague who will read what is written, then question its assumptions, ask what's new, and quibble about its language is a person to be cultivated" (Markland 1983:142).

Getting feedback from colleagues before a manuscript is submitted to a journal can significantly increase the chances of the manuscript being ultimately accepted for publication, but only if the feedback solicited is highly critical and authors respond to this feedback in a positive fashion. Authors should select critics with extensive reviewing experience and ask them to treat their manuscripts like they would if they had received these manuscripts from a journal editor for review. It is not essential that these critics be experts in the topic area of interest. A strong reviewer can usually provide excellent feedback on manuscripts dealing with a wide range of topics. The feedback writers receive from their colleagues on various aspects of the manuscript (e.g., conceptual definitions, theoretical rationale, measurement of the constructs, and writing) can provide valuable guidance as to how authors might improve their manuscripts.

Should the "reviews" received from an initial set of colleagues contain few substantive criticisms and/or

suggestions for major changes, authors should consider soliciting critiques from a second set of colleagues because it is unlikely that the first set of colleagues were being sufficiently critical. Almost all of the approximately 10 percent of the manuscripts that are eventually accepted for publication at leading research journals are the subject of substantial reviewer criticism and go through at least one major revision. Anyone who spends the time to give highly critical, constructive feedback to an author is doing the author an enormous favor.

### Responding to the Reviewers

Authors are seldom pleased by the reviewers' reactions to their manuscripts. After their initial reading of the reviewers' comments, authors are frequently angered and/or depressed because they feel the reviewers have not fairly judged their work, some reviewers more so than others. There is a natural tendency for authors to want to prove the most critical reviewers wrong, an approach that is dysfunctional to the goal of getting their manuscripts published. Authors need to pause to recover from their initial emotional reaction and develop a pragmatic approach to dealing with the reviews. They need to keep in mind that even the most critical reviewers are not vindictive and most of what they say is valid criticism. Reviewers for the leading research journals tend to be very successful researchers, and they typically spend from 1 to 2 days preparing their reviews for a single manuscript. The manuscript revision process must be guided by a careful consideration of the suggestions and critical comments of the reviewers and the editor.

When, even after careful consideration, the *specific content* of a reviewer's comment *appears* to be unjustified, authors should examine whether the comment is the product of some other problem with the manuscript. For example, authors may sometimes feel the reviewers are asking about issues already covered in their manuscripts or that the reviewers do not understand what the authors are doing. When this happens, it is best for authors to consider how they organized and explained things in their manuscript. It may be that the authors need to better communicate what was done. Reviewers spend considerable time and effort reading each manuscript. If they are confused, it is likely that the journal's readers will also be confused.

In addition to carefully studying the reviewers' individual comments, authors should look for trends in each reviewer's comments. It may be that several of a reviewer's comments are all related to a single basic problem. Reacting to the comments individually may not fix this problem and could even create additional problems by producing a disjointed manuscript. Authors should also look for recurring themes across reviewers. Studying the related comments as a group may give authors a better



understanding of the underlying problem and lead to a stronger paper than would a piecemeal approach. Moreover, any shortcomings that are noted by more than one reviewer deserve special attention.

Authors should try to respond to *all* of the reviewers' comments in a positive fashion. It is always in the author's best interest to set a tone for courtesy when responding to reviewers. The accepted norm is professionalism and courteousness even when communicating disagreements with the reviewers and the editor.

After making the necessary revisions to their manuscripts and formulating their responses to the reviewers, authors should prepare a thorough set of revision notes that address both the major themes included in each review and the reviewers' individual comments. A separate set of responses should be prepared for each reviewer. The revision notes are easiest for reviewers to follow when each of their individual comments is followed by the authors' detailed responses.

## THE STATE OF RESEARCH IN MARKETING: SOME PERSONAL OBSERVATIONS

While it is easy for an experienced reviewer to be critical of any study, research in marketing has greatly improved during the past two decades. Researchers are giving increased attention to providing a solid theoretical base for their studies. Theories developed in other disciplines have been widely used for this purpose. Purely descriptive studies have all but disappeared. More thought is also being given to how a given study fits into the existing literature and what contribution it makes. Because today's research studies are more theory based and tightly linked to the literature, the results of these individual studies are more easily generalized to other contexts.

Today's quantitative studies are more rigorously designed than past research. More attention is being given to the development and/or use of multiple-item measures of the central constructs and to providing evidence regarding the psychometric properties of the measures used in the study, primarily internal-consistency measures of reliability (e.g., coefficient  $\alpha$ ). Greater attention is being paid to selecting subjects that are appropriate for the research question of interest. There is less reliance on college undergraduate student samples. Finally, the results of today's studies are less open to alternative interpretations than past studies.

However, there are areas that are in need of improvement. These include (1) theory building research; (2) claims regarding convergent and discriminant validity; (3) use of single-source, self-report data; and (4) experimental realism.

## Lack of Theory-Building Research

Marketing researchers have devoted little attention to theory-building research. It is difficult to think of many empirical articles in marketing whose primary purpose is to develop theory as opposed to merely introducing marketers to theories developed in other disciplines (e.g., psychology and sociology) and/or testing existing theories. As a discipline, marketing has become content with borrowing theory from other disciplines. Several factors may contribute to this situation. First, most of our doctoral programs do not do a good job of teaching the qualitative research methods (e.g., conducting field interviews and case studies) that are essential to developing grounded theory.<sup>2</sup> Many doctoral programs devote very little time to these methods even though one could argue that rigorous qualitative research is more difficult to conduct, analyze, and report than are surveys or experiments. As a result, most graduates are not skilled at theory-building research. Second, many in our discipline appear to believe that qualitative research is inherently not as rigorous or prestigious as quantitative research (e.g., surveys and experiments) and, therefore, the results are difficult to publish. This belief seems to be reinforced by the fact that few doctoral dissertations are based on qualitative research, and one seldom sees a rigorous qualitative research study published in any of the leading research journals in marketing. It may also be due, in part, to the negative reactions of some researchers to those qualitative researchers who seem to feel that their research findings do not need to be objectively verifiable. For too many of the qualitative studies published in the past two decades, it is difficult, if not impossible, for other researchers to determine whether the authors' conclusions are adequately supported by the data collected and/or to replicate the authors' findings.

## Psychometric Properties of Measures

The vast majority of authors' claims regarding the convergent validity of their measures are unwarranted (i.e., maximally different methods of measurement are rarely used), tests for discriminant validity are typically very weak, and test-retest reliability is rarely examined.<sup>3</sup> Although authors often claim to have provided evidence regarding the convergent validity of their measures, it is usually the case that they use the same interitem correlations as evidence of both reliability and convergent validity. Furthermore, in many studies, it appears that the researchers have sacrificed the content validity of some of their measures by deleting items in their initial scales to develop unidimensional scales.<sup>4</sup> Often, the remaining items reflect a much narrower construct than that originally contemplated. Researchers need to give more consideration to using *formative scales* (i.e., scales for which

the observed measures are considered to form the abstract unobserved construct) in those situations where attempts to develop unidimensional *reflective scales* (i.e., scales whose item scores are considered to be caused by, or reflective of, the construct of interest) fail to result in measures with acceptable content validity. When this occurs, it is often the case that the construct is composed of several different aspects or dimensions that are not highly correlated.

### Single-Source Self-Report Data

A long-standing issue regarding studies employing surveys is that many involve self-reports and/or key-informant reports from a single source.<sup>5</sup> Data are never collected from any other source, and the survey respondents provide measures for both the independent and the dependent variables. The single-source issue is less of a concern when several of the variables are objective and/or factual in nature (e.g., the respondent's age and corporate profits as a percentage of sales) and, therefore, more likely to be independently verifiable from other sources. However, when most or all of the measures involve summary judgments of an attitudinal or perceptual nature, common method variance becomes a serious concern in interpreting the correlations between these measures. Another related problem with single-source data involving self-reports and/or key informants relates to the consistency motif. A great deal of past research on cognition and attitudes has shown that respondents have an urge to provide answers that they feel are logically consistent. This creates problems because respondents will often have lay theories of how the variables of interest should be related.

### Experimental Realism

Perhaps the most frequent and serious problem with experiments in marketing is the lack of experimental realism (i.e., the degree to which the experiment involves the participants, forces them to take it seriously, and has an impact on them).<sup>6</sup> Experiments that ask the participants to role-play without previously having had similar task-related experiences and/or for which there are no meaningful consequences for the participant tend to lack experimental realism. In these situations, the respondents are most likely to tell the experimenter what they feel is a reasonable response. Unfortunately, participants are not always able to predict how they would behave in a given situation.

### REVIEWING FOR SCHOLARLY JOURNALS IN MARKETING

Although they are frequently the targets of authors' anger, reviewers provide an indispensable service to the dis-

cipline. Without them, no top research journal could operate. Most reviewers are among the most prolific authors in the field. They serve as reviewers because they want to help the discipline advance, because they feel they owe it to their discipline, because of the prestige of being a member of an editorial board, and/or because they enjoy the reviewing process. How reviewers perform their jobs has a huge impact on how manageable editors' positions and authors' tasks are likely to be. Below are some guidelines for reviewers that help editors and/or authors fulfill their responsibilities.

1. Clearly identify all of the major problems with the manuscript that are within the reviewer's areas of expertise. Reviewers should avoid taking strong positions on issues that are not within their areas of expertise.
2. When making global evaluations (e.g., the writing is unclear, the theoretical rationale for the hypotheses are weak, etc.), provide specific examples supporting these evaluations.
3. Indicate which problems are major and which are minor.
4. Indicate which flaws appear to be correctable and which are not.
5. For correctable flaws, indicate what might be done to fix them.
6. For uncorrectable flaws, indicate which should be discussed in the Limitations section.
7. If the manuscript is considered to be potentially publishable with revisions, clearly indicate what must be done to make the article acceptable.
8. When recommending rejection of an article, specify the specific reasons (e.g., uncorrectable flaws). Provide a convincing argument as to why these flaws justify rejecting the manuscript.
9. Be tactful in writing the Comments to the Authors. Start these comments with some positive statements about the manuscript. Avoid making personal comments and using words with negative connotations (e.g., *naive* and *hopelessly confused*).
10. When not too time-consuming, direct the authors to articles or books that may be useful to them in revising their manuscripts and/or designing their next study. For example, if the theoretical rationale provided for a hypothesis is weak, cite previous research that might help the authors develop stronger rationale.
11. Avoid suggesting that the authors cite literature that is only loosely related to the research issues of interest.
12. Avoid asking the authors to cite the reviewer's articles unless they are central to the research.
13. Be open to alternative paradigms for studying the research questions of interest.
14. Allow the authors some flexibility to write the article they want to write.
15. Provide timely reviews (i.e., within 30 days).

## SUMMARY

A major key to getting one's research accepted for publication and dissemination in a leading journal is paying careful attention to doing the best job possible at every step of the research and publication process, starting with developing the research idea through preparing the final revision of the manuscript. The success of each step is dependent on the steps that preceded it (e.g., it is impossible to develop valid measures of constructs without having developed precise conceptual definitions of these constructs). Hence, it is important for researchers to check the adequacy of each completed aspect of their studies before proceeding to the next stage. Too frequently, researchers do not seek feedback from their colleagues until they have written the first draft of their manuscript. Moreover, feedback is only helpful when it is solicited from those with high levels of expertise, those providing the feedback are motivated to be highly critical, and those receiving the feedback are receptive to constructive criticism. Being responsive to criticism is especially critical when going through the review process at a major journal. Not infrequently, a publishable study never gets in print because the author chooses to argue with the reviewers, ignores the reviewers' comments, and/or otherwise fails to adequately address the reviewers' and editor's concerns and incorporate their suggestions in the revised manuscript.

Research in marketing has improved greatly both conceptually and methodologically during the past quarter century. However, much remains to be done. Theory-building research is lacking in marketing. Survey researchers should reduce their reliance on single-source, self-report data and use maximally different methods when trying to assess convergent validity. Finally, experimenters need to be more concerned with the experimental realism of their studies.

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## NOTES

1. This sample text is based on material found in Kohli (1985), as are most all sample texts presented in this section. Basically, the verbiage specific to Kohli's study was stripped from Kohli's article to provide a

sample text appropriate for a wide range of studies. This basic approach can and should be used with other particularly well-written articles.

2. For an excellent discussion of building theories from case study research, see Eisenhardt (1989).

3. For the most authoritative treatments of convergent and discriminant validity, see Campbell and Fisk (1959) and Campbell (1960).

4. For an authoritative discussion of content validity, see Cronbach (1971).

5. For an excellent discussion of the problems associated with single-source, self-report data, see Podsakoff and Organ (1986).

6. For an authoritative discussion of experimental realism, see Aronson and Carlsmith (1968).

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