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Editorial

Publishing perspectives from the editors

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After overseeing the review process of almost 1000 manuscripts over the course of 6 years, we, as editors, would like to synthesize some of the factors that we consider to be important to successfully publish in *Journal of Retailing* or other similar academic publications. Specifically, we discuss choosing an appropriate journal, topic, and the interrelation between the two. Second, we weigh in on one of the most difficult criteria for publication, establishing a contribution. Third, we examine some of the nitty-gritty issues of writing and rewriting a paper. We conclude with the final phase of the first round, submitting the paper and dealing with reviewer feedback.

Knowing the journal

In recent decades, various marketing studies consistently have identified several publications as the top journals in marketing (in alphabetical order): *Journal of Consumer Research*, *Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Marketing Research*, *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, *Journal of Retailing*, and *Marketing Science* (Hult et al. 1997). Because of their continued influence and significance, academics around the world compete to get their work published in these prestigious journals. But simply submitting to all of them, without consideration of their focus and purpose, represents a poor strategy. Rather, potential authors must gain a strong understanding of the type of research appropriate for each.

How do you develop a working knowledge about a journal? The answer is really quite simple: read the articles it publishes. Equally important, academics should review editorials written by the journal editors and understand the specific manuscript submission format requirements.

Submitting a manuscript to the *Journal of Retailing* also requires a good understanding of several facets of this journal. First, as the oldest marketing journal, dating back to 1926 and second in age only to the *Harvard Business Review* among general business journals, JR always has been and probably always will be specifically about retailing.

Second, for at least the past quarter century, the breadth of retailing-related research published in JR has been extremely broad. That breadth – and the journal's ongoing dedication to publishing work from a variety of retailing areas – means JR aims to provide articles on topics ranging from consumer behavior to traditional marketing management topics, as well as concepts as varied as supply chain management and location analysis. Before submitting, use the following question as a criterion: does the research investigate a retailer-to-consumer, supplier-to-retailer, or consumer-to-consumer issue? If so, the topic is probably appropriate for JR.

However, over our tenure as editors, we can identify very few instances in which we found a submitted manuscript inappropriate for *Journal of Retailing*. That is, as a top marketing journal, JR is committed to considering submissions from virtually all fields as long as the above-mentioned criteria are met. The current editors (Brown and Dant 2006), in a similar spirit, have defined the range of topics for *Journal of Retailing* very broadly. We all feel comfortable that most papers that might be submitted to other top marketing journals can be suitable submissions, as is further highlighted by the selection of associate editors, who represent a plethora of backgrounds and research interests. So, why would researchers choose *Journal of Retailing* over other premier marketing journals? If the implications of the study are slanted toward retailing, either retailing practice or theory, then JR is a suitable outlet.

JR is open to a multitude of topics ranging from issues pertaining to consumer behavior (e.g., Patrick and Park,

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2006), pricing (e.g., Darke and Chung, 2005; Dutta and Biswas, 2005), promotions (Kumar and Srinivasan, 2005), environment (e.g., Bailey and Areni, 2006), electronic marketplaces (e.g., Laroche et al., 2005; Yadav and Vardarajan, 2005), boundary spanning behavior (e.g., Bettencourt et al., 2005), product assortment (e.g., Morales et al., 2005), package (e.g., Sha and Raghubir, 2005), loyalty programs (e.g., Taylor and Neslin, 2005), visually impaired customers (e.g., Baker, 2006), entrepreneurship (e.g., Griffith et al., 2006), and franchising (e.g., Windsperger and Dant, 2006).

Picking the topic

Just as critical as picking the journal, picking an appropriate topic represents a key decision. After all, even if the response from your initial targeted journal seems less than positive, you may have many others publications from which to choose. Therefore, perhaps the most important criterion in choosing your research topic is to find one about which you personally feel passionate. Because you likely will be working on this topic (and its extensions) for many years, you want to ensure it is something you will continue to find interesting to maintain the necessary levels of hard work and commitment to it.

Think carefully through the merits of your chosen topic. If you pick a topic that reviewers believe does not make a contribution, no amount of revision will rectify the situation. However, even we acknowledge that reviewers (and editors) are not always right. If you believe in your project, you should take the feedback you receive and improve the project. If you have followed our first piece of advice – i.e., choosing a topic that fascinates you – you should be willing to continue to fight to get it published.

By the same token, it is important to realize that at some point, diminishing returns start to emerge, at which moment it may be best to move on to another project. Having colleagues read the paper and comments from reviewers, as well as provide their own comments, can help you make a dispassionate decision about whether your topic is worth pursuing further. (Remember: we have all gone through such painful exercises.)

When it comes to picking a topic, authors can consider three general domains: substantive, conceptual, and methodological (Brinberg and McGrath 1985). As we shown in Fig. 1, at the center of all three domains is your (or your research partners') unique perspective. That is, the experiences, perspectives, and skills you bring to any research are unique and thereby will shape the focus of your project and provide the voice for the resulting manuscript.

Substantive domain

As we noted previously, most research takes years to complete fully, so be sure to choose a valuable topic that interests you. A subject that appeals to you also is more likely to appeal

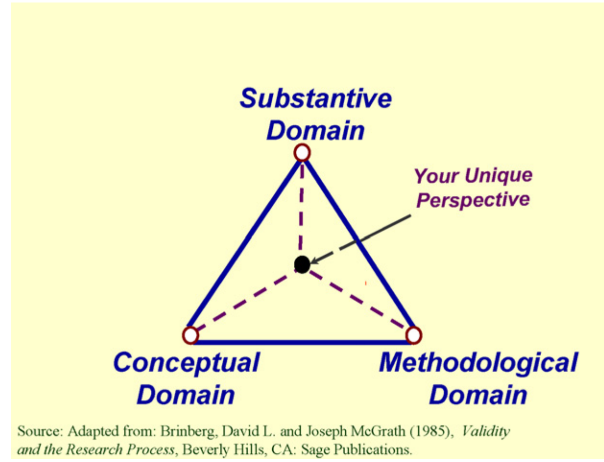

Fig. 1. Research domains. *Source*: adapted from Brinberg and McGrath (1985).

to others, which increases your chances of meeting the criterion of interesting research. And when you have reached post-tenure status, no longer driven by the unrelenting tenure clock to keep publishing, you will need interesting research to keep yourself active and motivated.

For some, choosing an interesting topic seems absurdly easy—they simply have known what they wanted to study since they first graduated. For those without such an obvious research focus, one of the best ways to select a compelling topic involves relying on their own unique perspectives, whether from previous industry or teaching experiences or inspiration provided by a class, a colleague, or previous research. Take the topic derived from this unique experience and imprint your own brand on the research stream. Imitation may be the sincerest form of flattery, but it also limits your chances of creating a unique contribution; instead, break loose and assert your own perspective and insights.

After choosing an interesting topic, based on your unique perspective, try to stick with it. Building a programmatic research theme not only focuses your research and enhances the literature but also helps define your personal brand.

Conceptual domain

An advantage of working in marketing, rather than other social sciences, is that we can borrow from many other disciplines. Although our ancestry derives from applied economics, much of our literature is rooted in psychology and other management disciplines, such as strategy.

Such broad-based expertise can be developed during a Ph.D. program by varying the coursework. Similarly, as ongoing learners, marketers can always take additional courses after they receive their Ph.D.s. Yet another option involves a strong reading list pertaining to a particular area; a good place to start would be an excellent review or meta-analysis article about the topic you want to include in your intellectual repertoire. Such articles provide excellent summaries of the conceptual domain of an area and appropriate original sources that warrant careful reading. When you revisit the original sources and definitive articles and books of a field, you also may discover a host of new research ideas.

When developing a topic, study a host of different theories. Read original sources and recent applications. Then try to integrate multiple theories. On this note, let us reiterate: a manuscript will not be published in JR without a strong conceptual framework.

Methodological domain

Many scholars, particularly those still fresh from Ph.D. programs, expend inordinate amounts of effort on the methodological details of their research. Although researchers absolutely must use appropriate research techniques, this domain is also the least important issue to consider when choosing a topic for JR. Because JRs position is not based predominantly on methodological contributions, choosing *appropriate* methods and research designs is far more important than developing new ones.

We do not mean to imply by any means that designing an appropriate study and choosing appropriate methods is trivial. Poorly conceived methods and improper research designs will make readers skeptical and ruin the credibility of any claims your research makes. However, incorrect methodology usually can be corrected or even redone with comparatively minimal effort.

Therefore, we strongly recommend a broad background in statistics, econometrics, management science, psychometrics, and qualitative research. Piece of cake, right? Developing such expertise may seem a bit daunting—just learn to walk on water, and you will be fine! Luckily, it is sufficient for authors to wade into shallow water and then swim with the assistance of their partners. Strong research partners also make the research process less risky, quicker, and, we hope, more fun. Find colleagues whom you find interesting and who have skill sets that synergistically add to your joint research project. In this case, 2 + 2 = 7. As most business schools now recognize, single-authored research is the exception rather than the rule. There is a good reason for that trend, and we encourage current authors to follow it.

Establishing the contribution

The number one reason cited by reviewers for their rejection of an article is its lack of an incremental contribution. Relative contribution relates to how interesting and important a topic is, but the degree to which a topic is interesting is, of course, quite subjective (Smith 2003). However, there are some objective standards in play. For example, interesting topics often entail some degree of innovation, new conceptualizations, and an ability to generalize findings beyond the immediate context (Hauser 2001; Shugan 2003). These characteristics are prized by editors and reviewers at virtually every journal and therefore should represent the foundation of any manuscript submitted.

In some cases, reviews focus not as much on the interest or innovation of research but rather on seemingly minor issues such as positioning or methodology. As editors, we recognize that such problems could be fixed, but we also realize that they often disguise the real reason for a rejection recommendation—that is, a lack of sufficient contribution.

With regard to the interest associated with a submitted article, we consider several additional factors related to audience. The research of course must be interesting to the marketing discipline in general and retailing in particular, but it also should be relevant and useful to at least one external audience, such as practitioners, educators, consultants, or public policymakers (Shugan 2003). By focusing the research published in JR on these constituencies, we are in effect working to become market oriented. To reach these constituencies, however, authors first must get through the review process. And reviewers, who are primarily academics, are not always in the best positions to judge what is relevant and interesting to non-academics. Therefore, it remains incumbent on authors to present strong arguments for the relevancy of their contributions to specific constituencies.

In all, how does an author make a contribution suitable for publication in JR? Papers published in JR must either address an important issue facing retailers or contribute to theory development. Although JR will publish articles whose primary contribution is methodological, these papers typically find their way to other journals with a slightly different focus. If the primary contribution is substantive, the study also must have a strong conceptual basis, but even if the contribution is primarily theoretical, the article still must address a topic that offers some managerial relevancy.

Tackling the length to contribution dilemma

Every author consistently walks a fine line between making a significant yet incremental contribution and biting off more than he or she can chew. Reviewers, and ostensibly readers, do not like to read long papers, and many journals, including JR, establish page limits. But more important than any specific page limit, the research must be substantive enough to make an appropriate contribution for the amount of space it requires.

Replications and extensions

A change in venue, such as investigating a well-understood bricks-and-mortars concept in the Internet space, seldom crosses the contribution hurdle. Replications are equally risky (Stewart 2002; Voss 2003), though exceptionally well-designed replication and extension research can make fine contributions (Levy and Grewal 2001). For example, if prior research has demonstrated that semantic price cues affect consumer perceptions of value, additional research that simply replicated these main effect findings would suffer a rather low incremental contribution-to-length assessment. In contrast, an extended demonstration that a particular semantic cue is more effective than another, depending on where the consumer views the semantic information, significantly expands the existing research. In this example, research in a single location (at home) simply replicates the previous research, but work that considers another location as well (in a store) extends it. In reality, most papers published in major journals are really replications and extensions—but they are significant replications and extensions, in that they provide new insights and innovative approaches.

So what?

It is a question asked simultaneously by high school journalism teachers, first-year English composition professors, and reviewers and editors of journals: *so what?* The single most important question that authors should ask about their own work, from the very moment they start writing, must be, "So what?" Why should readers care about the information contained in the article?

The answer to this question should be based on several sub-questions:

- Are the findings obvious? If so, then why should readers keep reading? They have already figured out the implications.
- Could the findings make a difference to retail practice? If not, then why would readers take the time to finish reading the paper? Marketers are busy people, and research that does not make a difference for them is not worth the time spent to read it.
- Could the findings answer some previously unresolved research questions or spur more research in the area? If not, then how does this information inform or enlighten readers?

These are not easy questions to answer about your own work; we all want to believe that the words we write are compelling and fascinating. But if you undertake a serious, objective analysis of your research and find the answers to these questions are yes, no, and no, you should consider carefully the direction your research has taken and how to correct it.

Writing and re-writing. And then re-writing again

After completing the research, it comes time to write the paper. But rare is the author who can just sit down and churn out a perfect version that matches the journal's standards in a first draft. All great writers consider writing a multistep process.

Start by getting a sense of how the manuscript should read—review articles published in your targeted journal (Stewart 2002) and study its submission guidelines. Some authors neglect these important details, which implies a distinct lack of professionalism and little respect for the journal or the reviewers' time.

During the writing process itself, allow for various iterations with multiple authors. Exploit each research partner's strengths to ensure the final draft encompasses the best that each author has to offer.

However, manuscripts that go through these several iterations, often over many months, inevitably change in radical and often unexpected ways—the paper gets repositioned, references appear and disappear, and tables get dropped. Therefore, before submitting that "final" draft, it is important to verify that the beginning, the middle, and the end are all tied together and read like a single paper.

Although it is important to keep the research/writing process moving, it is best not to rush to submission. Read the paper. Have several colleagues whom you believe will tell the truth read it too. Pretend you are a reviewer and read it once more. Submit it to a professional copyeditor—perhaps one of the best small investments you can make in your future.

Only when you are comfortable and confident that the version you have is cohesive, compelling, and well written should you submit. Then, if given the chance to revise, do so quickly, because an invitation to revise and resubmit represents a strongly positive signal from the editors. More than 75 percent of JR submissions get rejected in the first round, but of those papers offered a revision opportunity, approximately 90 percent ultimately get published.

Making sure all the parts are in place and working

Every author maintains certain writing preferences, and every journal has its own style. Therefore, we offer some general tips for putting together a manuscript that will enable you to meet the standards for JR submission.

Title

The title should be eye-catching but not too cute. It also should be descriptive of the research. Avoid overly long titles, and note there is no requirement that titles be separated by a colon.

Abstract

As the first thing many readers will see, the abstract should grab readers' attention in approximately 150 words. Along with the executive summary required by *Journal of Retailing*, the abstract provides the incentives to read the paper. Describe what you have done and what you have discovered; then answer that key question, "So what?" by explaining the contribution that the manuscript makes.

Introduction

The crucial objective of the introduction is to position the manuscript within the literature and establish its contribution. Because JRs mission ties so closely to advancing the field of retailing, it may be useful to weave a real-world example into your discussion of previous research. Clearly state your purpose and objective, and end with a short outline of your paper. The introduction should be no more than one to two double-spaced pages.

Conceptual and hypothesis development

This section tells your story. To help you build a logical and cogent foundation for your hypotheses, describe important previous research that informs your topic—but avoid a laundry list or Who's Who? of readings. If you are testing a model, it should be tight, by which we mean it must include the important constructs and exclude tertiary constructs. The conceptual development section offers you the space to defend and explain your model. Finally, this section presents another opportunity to establish the contribution of the research: is the topic obvious, is it interesting, and will anyone care? Here is where you can answer those questions to the benefit of your research and your readers.

Method

The straightforward methods section must be appropriate to the journal. For example, if you use a methodology common to marketing research, there is no need to elaborate. But if your chosen techniques are relatively new to marketing literature, you must provide a more elaborate explanation. Because the primary contribution of papers published in JR generally is not methodological, and readers typically seek insights into retailing practice or theory, it is better to err on the side of complete explanations and then allow the reviewers and editors to pare down the discussion if necessary.

In addition to these clear descriptions, JR and similar journals require several specific details. Some standard issues include discussing the sample and/or key informants, describing and following appropriate scale development and presentation techniques, establishing validity and reliability appropriately (MacKenzie 2003), and using the proper analytical technique.

Results

As we noted previously, most papers go through several iterations prior to their submission. As a result, sometimes the findings simply do not seem to match the hypotheses, tables, and figures. This flaw is not only confusing; it also makes it seem as though the authors simply are not paying attention. Readers should be able to understand the essence of the paper by reading the manuscript, without necessarily referring to tables and figures. In the same way, the tables and figures should stand on their own as much as possible. Avoiding abbreviations where possible often helps.

Conclusion

The conclusion provides the opportunity to explain to readers what the results really mean. A little editorial freedom and interpretation is allowed in this section, though not too much. Authors must strike a balance between explaining their results and generalizing beyond the legitimate boundaries of the study.

The conclusion should again remind readers of the study's main contributions. After wading through the entire body of the paper, readers need to be gently reminded why this particular research adds to their understanding of retailing theory and/or practice. A short section on the study's limitations and directions for future research also should appear in this section.

Dealing with reviewer feedback

When the reviews are in, take a few deep breaths and think about what the reviewers are really saying. Try to view the discussion from their eyes. If they have made comments that indicate they misunderstood your point, you may not have written with sufficient clarity. Remember, it is the author's job to communicate; readers should not have to struggle to understand the point of a research paper. Try to understand how and why they arrived at their position of confusion.

Learn from the review process. Make the reviewers' suggested revisions to the extent possible, even if you will be sending the revised manuscript to a different journal. By integrating the suggestions and comments of people who review hundreds of articles a year, you will improve your paper. And if the reviewer is an expert in the field, the chances are quite good he or she sits on other editorial boards and may be asked to review the paper for another journal. Ignoring reviewers' suggestions is a sure way to get a subsequent negative review.

Conclusion

Our objective of this article was to address some of the most prevalent and salient questions that we have received during the past 6 years as editors of *Journal of Retailing* by individuals and at various "Meet the Editor" forums. In particular: how does one successfully publish in *Journal of Retailing* or other similar academic publications? How does one increase the probability that the research will be perceived to make a significant contribution? What are some "tips of the trade" that will help in the writing process? Finally, how should one deal with reviewer feedback? We have drawn from the thoughts of other researchers and editors, and have tried to put our own JR slant to these issues. We sincerely hope that something that we have said will strike a cord, and will help further the academic writing process.

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