



Inspiring future generations of industrial marketing scholars

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Industrial marketing
Mentor
Inspiration
Peter LaPlaca

ABSTRACT

This paper highlights the important and often invaluable impacts that mentoring, even implicitly, can have on aspiring researchers. It offers a personal narrative that reflects on the events and interactions during which I came to know, meet and be inspired by Peter LaPlaca, and pays tribute to his contributions to inspiring other industrial marketing scholars.

1. Introduction

Good mentors can have an invaluable and long-lasting impact on a scholar's career and life. Perhaps most profoundly, mentors often shape and influence the aspirations and worldview of their mentees, more than they may realize. I was both very fortunate and privileged to have Professor Peter LaPlaca as my dissertation examiner and opponent, and later a close and valued mentor. In the following, I will describe my personal experience of how I came to know of, meet, and ultimately, be inspired by Peter.

2. Knowing Peter LaPlaca

Like most of us, I first knew Peter only as the eminent figure who ran *Industrial Marketing Management* (IMM), the premiere journal of business-to-business (B2B) marketing. While I was yet to understand what that actually meant when I began my PhD studies in industrial marketing in early 2010, the impression I had was akin to the Godfather of B2B marketing.

Colleagues near and far described Peter as a scholar who was friendly and fair yet demanding and critical. As an editor-in-chief, who was willing to see beyond the surface, and cultivate underdeveloped ideas if they had potential. And above all, as a person, who was passionately driven to develop B2B marketing and practice. What I gathered from all that though, was that to be approved by Peter you need to come up with research that could make major advances in B2B marketing. Ok. No pressure.

As my doctoral dissertation on customer value assessment in business markets (Keränen, 2014) was finally nearing its completion in mid-2013, I and my PhD supervisor, Professor Anne Jalkala, started drafting an “ideal” list of potential dissertation examiners. Our goal was to seek

out distinguished scholars, who could provide the best guidance to develop the findings, as well as my own thinking, to the level where those could have a chance to start contributing to industrial marketing research. Scholars, who would not hold anything back on issues they thought could be addressed better. This was either a fantasy or nightmare list of examiners, depending on how you looked at it. And Peter LaPlaca was sitting at the top¹ of it.

3. Seeing Peter LaPlaca

We decided to approach Peter, as a potential examiner, during the IMP (Industrial Marketing & Purchasing) 2013 conference in Atlanta, USA. As the academic protocol would have it, this discussion was to be had between Peter and Anne. My role at the conference was to observe Peter from afar, and make notes on the issues and comments he raised during the sessions.

I remember being impressed by the depth and breadth of Peter's knowledge. Regardless of the topic, he was able to weave in the key points, help the authors (and the audience) understand and frame their contributions in a broader context, and then offer insights on how they could develop their ideas even further. Peter made this look so easy, as if he were just figuring out the answers on the fly without missing a beat. But what stood out most, was the way Peter delivered his feedback; kindly and warmly, building on and extending what was said and often seeking out the authors afterwards to offer additional advice. Much to my delight, by the end of conference, Peter had not only accepted the role of external examiner but also that of opponent in the public examination that would be held in Finland.

When I later received Peter's initial comments on the dissertation, I was again surprised how generously he offered insightful ideas on how to expand even the minor issues, how warm and constructive the

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¹ Professor Wolfgang Ulaga was the other examiner. Together with Peter, they were the top two choices on our “ideal” list. I am deeply grateful to both of them for having accepted the task of examining and reviewing my doctoral dissertation, and providing excellent comments.

overall tone of the review report was, and how skillfully he teased out potential areas for future research. It felt as if Peter were already encouraging me to think about where I should take my research next.

4. Meeting Peter LaPlaca

While I had already “known”, seen, and even interacted with Peter (via email), I met him formally for the first time about an hour before the public examination² of my dissertation, on Friday 13th June 2014. And what an introduction it was. While the dress code required only tailcoat, Peter had brought out the big guns: the academic robe and hood! The message was clear: he meant business! My hopes of friendly debate seemed to vanish into thin air, and the thought of having horribly misinterpreted the tone of Peter's comments started to creep into my mind as I shook his shovel-sized hand.

However, I could not have been more wrong. Peter took his time to make sure I was comfortable and prepared me for a relaxed debate that would ensure an academically rigorous yet enjoyable and entertaining defense. Peter's skills and experience in facilitating the event were clearly visible, as he centered on theoretically broader and more applied but also tougher questions: Why and how (I thought) my findings were important to and would advance industrial marketing and management; how they could be applied in other contexts; and where I planned to continue from there? This not only forced me to think outside the study but was likely more entertaining to the audience as well. In fact, several members of the audience remarked later that Peter's performance had been one of the most memorable they had seen in a long time.

As we later celebrated the event with a dinner, Peter showed that his enthusiasm and wisdom were not limited to life within academia. In fact, he was a fervent believer in having a life and interests outside academia, too. It was not just relieving, but enlightening to hear that even the most accomplished of us did not only actively enjoy life, but also used it to fuel their intellectual curiosity and passion for scholarly research.

5. Inspired by Peter LaPlaca

While seeing, meeting, and interacting with Peter during the examination process influenced and shaped my understanding of astute academic scholarship, it was only later that I became truly inspired by Peter. This set of events unfolded over the next three IMP conferences.

At IMP 2014 in Bordeaux, France, we talked several times, but one occasion stood out. I sought Peter out at a lunch break with what I

thought would be a minor question before we both headed to the next sessions. However, the supposedly brief answer turned into a forty-five minute personal lecture about what was important to drive B2B marketing forward.

It was personal, because the passion, fervor, and also frustration that Peter felt about the challenges he thought were hindering scholars from advancing industrial marketing theory and practice were palpable. It was personal, because Peter made me feel as if he wanted to share the responsibility of understanding – and perhaps addressing – some of those challenges with me. And it was personal, because it made me realize how deeply Peter cared for industrial marketing...and that I wanted to share that enthusiasm and passion!

I met Peter again at IMP 2015 (Kolding, Denmark) and 2016 (Poznan, Poland). At both conferences he sought me out, and in front of senior peers and colleagues spoke of and for me (often not too modestly, I should add). While I will forever treasure those compliments, I later realized also what Peter had cleverly set up: implicit and internal expectations for me to pursue those (purposefully) lofty goals that were now, thanks to Peter, public knowledge. As I later observed that I was not the only one who got “set up” by Peter's compliments and encouragement, I could but smile, and marvel how masterfully he inspired the aspiring industrial marketing scholars.

6. In closing

I have been both very fortunate and privileged to be guided and mentored by Peter. This has had a profound influence on the kind of researcher, educator, and colleague – and if luck has it, a role model to others one day – I aspire to be. Peter is not only a world class scholar, but also a caring and warm-hearted mentor willing to generously extend his advice to younger colleagues.

While this paper has described my personal experience, in a broader context it is likely but one example of how Peter has inspired many other junior, emerging, and/or established, industrial marketing scholars. I hope this tribute conveys my deep appreciation, and respect, for Peter, whose impact and influence is reflected in my and no doubt many others' work and life today.

References

- Keränen, J. (2014). *Customer value assessment in business markets* (Doctoral dissertation) Finland: Acta Universitatis Lappeenrantaensis. Lappeenranta University of Technology.

² In Finland, the examination is a public event which follows a formal protocol, and is usually attended by not only academics and colleagues, but also family and friends.