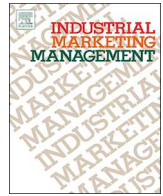




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How to develop original, courageous ideas in business marketing research

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ABSTRACT

Despite evidence of meticulous business-to-business marketing research efforts, and the pleas of editors for truly original, ground-breaking research, there is still a shortage of original, courageous research ideas. To provide guidance to researchers and address this problem, we apply the OBC model (observe the world, bridge disciplines, and challenge assumptions and theories), proposed by Kock, Assaf, and Tzionas (2020). We discuss the three main and four blended strategies recommended by this model, and illustrate each of these strategies with examples drawn from the marketing literature. Our application of the OBC model offers actionable guidelines for generating original research ideas, as well as theoretical grounding for each element of the model. Given the publication pressure felt by young academic researchers, we hope that our discussion provides encouragement and guidance, which will result in original, courageous business-to-business marketing research.

1. Introduction

Since the inaugural issue of *Industrial Marketing Management* in September 1971, research devoted to business marketing has expanded tremendously. Prior to its introduction, no journal had focused specifically on this academic domain, which clearly represented a gap; by addressing this need, the journal has enjoyed substantial growth on every relevant quantitative measure, including objective submission, page, and citation counts, as well as more subjective indicators such as professional respect. The very number of downloaded articles from *Industrial Marketing Management* suggests that a broad and growing academic community finds its content useful. Furthermore, the research published is impactful, according to the Thomson ISI Impact Factor of citations.

In 2018, *Industrial Marketing Management's* Two-Year Impact Factor reached 4.779 (its Five-Year Impact Factor was 5.088). Three contributing features have enabled and ensured continued improvements in both quality and influence (Touzani & Moussa, 2010):

- (1) *Industrial Marketing Management* is read by academics interested in related fields such as strategy, management, innovation, and product development, expanding its influence beyond the narrower field of marketing.
- (2) The quality of articles published in *Industrial Marketing Management* has increased, leading to more citations in recent years.
- (3) Research topics covered by the journal have grown in importance.

Such academic prosperity should generate original, courageous research efforts. Instead, we observe the contrary: *Industrial Marketing Management* publishes more articles, but the number of truly original contributions has not increased, which means more relevant knowledge is not necessarily being created. The problem is not limited to this journal. Virtually every publication calls for original manuscripts, and virtually every journal editor worries about the lack of original research

being submitted. This gap might reflect the ongoing, extreme pressure on researchers to publish in top-tier journals, yet this explanation actually is paradoxical, because originality and courageousness are essential criteria demanded by the best journals. That is, if researchers encounter both pressures to publish and calls from journals to submit original, courageous research, why do not we see more original, courageous research being published?

The answer may be both obvious and difficult to address. Devising original ideas is difficult in any setting (Smith, 2003), including research, but the underlying, intuitive argument—that originality is the biggest challenge facing researchers—has been ignored in studies that analyze the dearth of original research. Instead, a prevalent assumption seems to predict that if the contextual factors inhibiting originality were removed, original research would naturally follow, like a *deus ex machina*. However, great ideas are the scarcest resource.

Such a situation means that business marketing research and its contributors need help and guidelines for generating original, courageous research ideas. Especially for early- and mid-career researchers, generic advice such as “be more critical,” “make sure your topic is relevant,” or “think outside the box” simply is not helpful. Furthermore, among the many things that young researchers can learn from reading contributions to top-tier journals, they are unlikely to find detailed discussions of how these authors arrived at their research idea.

In response, we leverage a tripartite model to guide researchers: observe the world, bridge disciplines, and challenge assumptions and theories (OBC) by Kock et al. (2020). Our application of the model includes concrete guidelines for generating original, courageous research ideas, as well as theoretical grounding for each strategic element of the model and a methodology for making them actionable.

2. The OBC model

The OBC model encompasses three fundamental, strategic elements, reflecting three actions: observe, bridge, and challenge. Each of them

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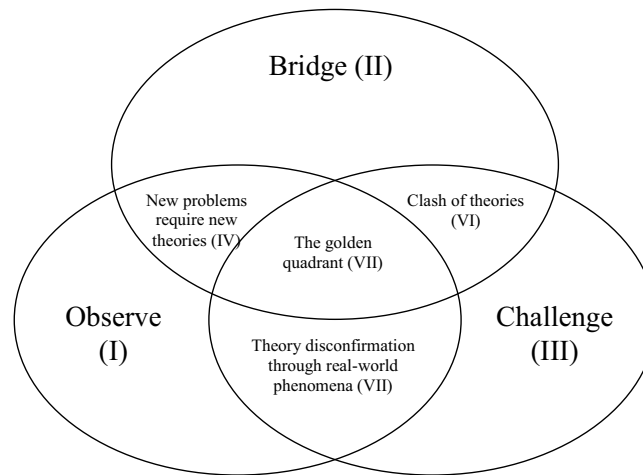


Fig. 1. The OBC model as a Venn diagram.

can be executed independently or in combination. Our presentation of the application of the OBC model includes a theoretical discussion of the strategies, a methodology for executing it (such that, strictly speaking, the OBC model is a meta-methodology), illustrations with marketing (both business-to-business and business-to-consumer) research examples, and caveats to bear in mind. Adopted from Kock et al. (2020), Fig. 1 provides an overview of the three strategies (I, II, and III) and their fusions, which also constitute strategies (IV, V, VI, and VII).

2.1. Strategy I: Observe the world

To be relevant, concepts and theories must be grounded in compelling, interesting, real-world observations. The importance of a notion is proportional to the vividness and relevance of the phenomena it can explain. Accordingly, original, courageous research ideas might best be gathered from real life rather than inspired by previous publications—yet this source of ideas appears rarely exploited by existing business marketing research. Motivating research from vivid phenomena, instead of doing “research on research,” also reflects our goal with this editorial. With this view, we also caution that identifying phenomena can lead to original, courageous research only if the researcher can provide evidence that they are real and pertinent and that studying them is critical to business marketing. Having done so though, researchers will have a clear and obvious foundation for arguing for the motivation, purpose, and contribution of their research, for both peers and non-scientific audiences. This foundation also enables them to establish, elegantly, who will be affected by and benefit from the research findings.

To derive research ideas from observing the world, we emphasize several concrete suggestions made by Kock et al. (2020). First, phenomena generally evident in the world potentially have relevance for business marketing efforts. An example of this ‘outside-in’ approach is the study by Maon, Lindgreen, and Vanhamme (2009) that examined how disaster relief operations (i.e., a real-world phenomenon of broad significance) affect the design and implementation of commercial supply chain and logistics management operations. Second, some observed phenomena may be more immanent to business marketing, but also extend beyond it, which would evoke an ‘inside-out’ approach. An example of this is the study that identifies how brands ‘dupe’ consumers by positioning brands’ authenticity through ambiguity in the advertisements of these brands (Beverland, Lindgreen, & Vink, 2008; Dickinson-Delaporte, Beverland, & Lindgreen, 2010). This original idea is inherent and originates from the marketing world. Third, novel phenomena could be internal to conventional business marketing, and studying them could offer insights that are relevant mostly for the discipline, which constitutes an ‘inside-in’ approach. Thus, although

Walley, Custance, Taylor, Lindgreen, and Hingley’s (2007) study offers relevant insights into the role of branding in industrial purchasing of agricultural tractors in the UK, these insights are likely to be limited interest to other than marketers.

After identifying significant phenomena through one of these approaches, researchers also need a suitable theoretical lens for examining the original ideas. Ideally, the process of identifying important phenomena also reveals which theory is most appropriate. In this process, researchers must consider analysis strategies outside of the business marketing domain, in line with Strategy IV (discussed subsequently), which recognizes that “new problems require new theories.” An example is Beverland and Lindgreen (2004) who draw on punctuated equilibrium (a theory that was developed in evolutionary biology by Niles Eldredge and Stephen Jay Gould) when they develop a model of relationship development that explains how firms decide not to invest in relationships or to form and intensify in relationships.

Finally, while observing the world, researchers must keep some caveats in mind. In particular, this strategy can seduce researchers into dedicating themselves to topics and efforts beyond their current capabilities. Particularly for young researchers, diving into a completely new literature stream is risky and difficult; they may not be able to predict the depth accurately. Therefore, in addition to identifying a range of ideas, they should scrutinize the potential of each identified phenomenon, then pursue the one that emerges as most promising or with the highest priority. Furthermore, researchers who observe the world need to avoid getting caught in a phenomenological singularity, focused exclusively on a phenomenon that only appears in a narrow context and is rather exotic, because the resulting research findings will likely have only limited implications for a restricted audience. An example is Hingley, Leek, and Lindgreen (2008) that utilized Morrissey’s song lyrics (that concern interpersonal relationships) to analyze interpersonal business-to-business relationships. Although the research was nominated for the Sage Publications-sponsored *The Times Higher Education Research Project of the Year*, this research is exotic and has limited implications. Not surprisingly, according to Harzing’s Publish or Perish, the research has attracted but three citations.

2.2. Strategy II: Bridging disciplines

Academic bridging joins two or more disciplines, through an “intentional effort to draw on the human, theoretical, methodological, and/or empirical resources of a related discipline to shed new light on one’s own discipline” (Joireman & Van Lange, 2015, p. 82). Bridging disciplines can reveal original and courageous ideas, as well as produce new theory construction if theories get redesigned to fit the new, combined discipline. However, we tend to immerse ourselves in our

own discipline, without looking beyond its boundaries, which can hinder the identification of original ideas. Instead, each domain reproduces its own commonsense theories, mindsets, and assumptions. There are several examples of such discipline-bridging studies in business-to-business marketing: [Nicholson, Tsagdis, and Brennan's \(2013\)](#) application of theory from economic geography to business-to-business competition; [Wilkinson's \(2006\)](#) use of an evolutionary approach to building business-to-business marketing theory; and the application of Darwinian theory to understand business-to-business marketing relationships ([Johansson & Kask, 2013](#)).

To avoid such insularity, all researchers need to read beyond their own disciplines and pursue greater exposure to other research domains. A challenge for time-pressured researchers is identifying which theoretical or methodological concepts in other disciplines might be relevant to business marketing (Strategy IV: New problems require new theories), enhance or challenge existing business marketing theory (Strategy VI: Clash of theories), or set a foundation for a new business marketing research agenda. The process of recontextualization is relevant here, because it implies redefining or redesigning an original theory to apply to issues in a different discipline.

To illustrate this process, we consider an example that uses theory from neurosciences research. Originating in medical research, neuroscience has been applied successfully in consumer marketing, where researchers understand target customer motivations and behavior by applying neuroscientific tools rather than interviews and focus groups (see, for example, [Lee, Broderick, & Chamberlain, 2007](#)). The application of so-called neuromarketing techniques in business-to-business settings, as well as limitations of these techniques, has been discussed recently ([Lim, 2018](#)).

Again, a few caveats arise though. The key hurdle to bridging—and a reason for its rare use—is the requirement that researchers become conversant in multiple disciplines. Our advice is to avoid jumping constantly or frivolously across disciplines. Instead, original work demands deep understanding of and extensive training in key domains, so researchers should expand their reading but do so in an intentional and targeted way ([Ladik & Stewart, 2008](#)). Nor should they borrow theories carelessly, which actually would constrain theory building for business marketing. The theories must be redesigned or developed particularly for the discipline. Such efforts to derive original business marketing theories in turn can enhance and benefit the originating disciplines from which the theories were derived.

2.3. Strategies III–VII: Challenge assumptions and theories

A third path toward courageous research involves pushing the boundaries by challenging the assumptions and theories on which prior studies rely. We find little business marketing research that does so; instead, many studies simply build uncritically on consolidated beliefs and thereby reinforce them. Established, widely accepted methods for arriving at research ideas involve identifying gaps in existing literature (i.e., incremental gap spotting, [Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011](#)) rather than challenging existing assumptions. However, hypotheses that are consistent with existing research tend to appear intuitive, prompting the dreaded reviewer question, “so what?” Original, courageous ideas demand that researchers step back from the obvious theoretical layer and identify questionable core assumptions.

Doing so is not, of course, easy. Constant questioning of the assumptions and theories that underlie decades of research requires the ability to think differently and critically, supported by a problematization methodology ([Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013](#)). Problematization includes five steps: (1) select a domain, (2) identify its underlying assumptions, (3) evaluate the assumptions critically, (4) develop an alternative grounding, and (5) evaluate and test the alternative. As an example of an alternative grounding in networking theory is presented by [Peters, Gassenheimer, and Johnson \(2009\)](#) who advocate the use of structuration theory to explain the relationship

between firm-level and individual learning, and how this learning increases the firm's ability to create value for customers. This perspective differs from a more traditional, reductionist view of the business network, which portrays the network as simply the sum of its member parts (see discussion in [Hadjikhani & LaPlaca, 2013](#)).

Following [Kock et al. \(2020\)](#), we believe the most difficult step is the second one because identifying questionable assumptions requires counterfactual reasoning, defined as an ability to conceive of alternatives to existing theoretical assumptions through contrastive questioning ([Tsang & Elsaesser, 2011](#)). Two concrete approaches can help in this effort, through links with Strategies I and II. With the clash of theories strategy (Strategy VI in [Fig. 1](#)), researchers pit two (or more) theories with contrasting predictions against one another to highlight a challenge to at least one of them. This approach is consistent with a bridging disciplines strategy, in that contrasting theories often represent or emerge from distinct disciplines. [Peters, Pressey, Vanharanta, and Johnston \(2013\)](#) take such an approach when discussing the application of two different research traditions (critical realism and constructivism) to the study of business networks. In their empirical study of a specific issue within business networks (novation, or replacement of an obligation between network members), they find managerial value in both theoretical approaches, despite differences in ontological position. Alternatively, theory disconfirmation through real-world phenomena (Strategy VII in [Fig. 1](#)) combines Strategies I and III. Researchers might witness a phenomenon that conflicts with the assumptions and conclusions provided by their research tradition, thereby inspiring an effort to contrast the phenomenon with these existing concepts. Such phenomena are excellent starting points; they offer initial, anecdotal evidence that a particular theory might not hold in all contexts, which should inspire both challenges to existing literature and insightful moderation analyses. For example, examining two empirical datasets in business-to-business networks with multiple buyers and sellers, [McCabe, Stern, and Dacko \(2013\)](#) demonstrate that stochastic modeling based on the Dirichlet stochastic model can be used to predict purchase patterns and loyalty. The authors suggest that their methodology provides a useful tool for decision makers, but also can be used as a basis for development of integrated theory of network relationship evolution.

2.4. Strategy VII: The Golden quadrant

As these seemingly separated discussions of the previous strategies reveal, efforts to observe the world, bridge disciplines, and challenge assumptions can be practiced independently, but they also produce synergy effects through combinations. Thus, combining all three strategies might produce a golden quadrant (Strategy VII)—arguably most difficult approach. It results when a researcher is able to identify and articulate a relevant real-world phenomenon (Strategy I), then examine it across disciplines (Strategy II), and thereby pose pertinent questions to existing ideas and advance the research domain (Strategy III).

An example that fits the golden quadrant is research that has examined managers' assumptions about ecological sustainability and developed an appreciation of strategies that firms may follow ([Borland, Ambrosini, Lindgreen, & Vanhamme, 2016](#); [Borland & Lindgreen, 2013](#)). To achieve this, the authors concentrated on ecological sustainability as discussed in different scientific disciplines (e.g., anthropocentric epistemology and ecocentric epistemology), meaning that the identified ecocentric transformational marketing strategies include not only the business environment, but also the natural environment (e.g., ecological science and, in turn, natural sciences). In doing so, this research questions the premises for marketing strategy. Thus, in addition to achieve a sustained competitive advantage and to influence consumers' preferences, a marketing strategy also must “incorporate the physical environment as the source of physical well-being for all species, as well as the source of all products and services,” the authors argue ([Borland & Lindgreen, 2013](#): p. 11). Finally, by proposing

universal premises and key principles that ecocentric transformational marketing strategies must adhere to, the research advances knowledge on what constitutes a strategy for sustainability.

3. Conclusions

Despite evidence of rigorous, meticulous, business marketing research efforts, we find a troubling dearth of original, courageous ideas. In an attempt to provide meaningful, practical advice to help researchers find original ideas and write courageous manuscripts, we apply the OBC model developed by Kock et al. (2020), along with the three main and four blended strategies it recommends. In light of the continuous and growing publication pressures on (especially young) academic researchers, together with desperate pleas from journal editors for original, courageous manuscript submissions, we hope this editorial provides pertinent guidelines and encourages researchers to continue to perform original and courageous research in business marketing.

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