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ORIGINAL EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

The contribution continuum

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The question, "What constitutes a knowledge contribution?" has a simple and straightforward answer that is less than simple or straightforward to accomplish (David Glen Mick).

The most common reason manuscripts fail to clear the hurdle necessary for publication in leading journals is a lack of strong incremental contribution. Reviewers often compliment the exposition of a paper and praise the research design only to conclude that the paper contains nothing that is newsworthy. This is a frustrating outcome for an author. As a result, the most frequent question asked of editors is, "What is a contribution?" and how does one tell if the contribution is large enough to merit publication. Even papers that are eventually published in very good journals often start the review process with reviewers' comments to the effect that the contribution of the paper is unclear. Less experienced scholars often have an especially difficult time articulating their paper's contribution, but even accomplished researchers can fail to explain why a paper is important and what it adds to the literature. More often than not, authors do not clarify their paper's contribution and/or express how their paper's contribution *adds to what is already known* or how it *significantly extends* prior published work. Every editor of a journal has answered the question of what a contribution is. Despite the frequency of the question it has seldom been directly addressed in print.

The objectives of this paper are to (1) collect the insights of past and present editors of major journals in marketing, (2) help clarify what a contribution is, (3) illustrate how a contribution relates to a manuscript's likelihood of being published, and (4) develop a continuum of the forms and types of contributions that exist. To accomplish this goal, we asked past and present editors of leading marketing journals, "What is a contribution?" Each editor wrote a short essay ranging from approximately 250 to 750 words outlining their thoughts on what is and how to make a contribution. The past and present editors that contributed to this paper are identified in Table 1. The editors' responses, as data, were reviewed and inductively synthesized to form common themes from across the essays. In sum, "the contribution concept represents an outcome-based measure in which the knowledge generated from the manuscript is compared with the extant knowledge contained within the literature stream" (Michael Dorsch). A contribution is made when a manuscript clearly adds, embellishes, or creates something beyond what is already known.

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Table 1 Editors contributing comments for this paper

Editor	Editorship tenure
Eric Arnould	Associate Editor, *Journal of Consumer Research* (2000–current)
Barry Babin	Associate Editor (Marketing), *Journal of Business Research* (1999–current)
Anthony DiBenedetto	*Journal of Product Innovation Management* (2004–current)
Michael Dorsch	*Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice* (2002–2005)
Dhruv Grewal	*Journal of Retailing* (2001–2007)
Ronald Paul Hill	*Journal of Public Policy and Marketing* (2006–current)
Raymond Laforge	*Marketing Education Review* (1990–1998)
Donald Lehmann	*Marketing Letters* (1989–1996)
	Co-Editor, *International Journal of Research in Marketing* (2006–current)
Michael Levy	*Journal of Retailing* (2001–2007)
Robert Lusch	*Journal of Marketing* (1996–1999)
Richard Lutz	*Journal of Consumer Research* (1988–1990)
David Glen Mick	*Journal of Consumer Research* (2000–2003)
A. Parasuraman	*Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* (1997–2000)
	Journal of Service Research (2005–current)
Roland Rust	*Journal of Service Research* (1998–2005)
	Journal of Marketing (2005–2008)
James Stock	*International Journal of Physical Distribution and Logistics Management* (1990–2003)
	Journal of Business Logistics (2005–current)
Rajan Varadarajan	*Journal of Marketing* (1993–1996)
	Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science (2000–2003)
Barton Weitz	*Journal of Marketing* Research (1991–1994)
	Co-Editor, *Marketing Letters* (1997–2006)
George Zinkhan	*Journal of Advertising* (1990–1994)
	Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science (2000–2003)

The present paper is organized in two parts. The first part of the paper presents four themes that were common to all editors' essays. These include (1) clarifying the target audience, (2) the subjective nature of a contribution, (3) the importance of passion for the research topic, and finally, (4) surprise. The second part of the paper examines strategies for creating strong contributions. This section of the paper may be most useful for doctoral students and younger scholars, but we also hope that it is helpful to more experienced scholars. Numerous editors suggested using Brinberg and McGrath's (1985) substantial, conceptual, and methodological domains as a guide to organizing thoughts when creating and executing a paper. In addition, a continuum of contributions based on magnitude from a literal replication to developing a new theory that predicts a new phenomenon (e.g., the theory of relativity) is introduced and discussed. The paper concludes with a checklist of elements rigorous research should contain, as well as a list of questions to ask to avoid the dreaded "*So what?*" response from an editor.

Four common themes

Target audience

To me, the first step toward a contribution is to think very carefully about the audience to whom you wish to make the contribution. Is it other academics? Is it practitioners? Thinking carefully about the intended audience and the nature of the audience is crucial. For example, an academic audience is generally interested in a theoretical advance, whereas practitioners want actionable implications. Decide on the nature of your intended contribution and state it clearly as your research objective. (Richard Lutz).

The first common theme across the editors' essays focused on the need to consider the target audience of an intended contribution. David Glen Mick observed that a manuscript should result in a change in the audience of an intended contribution: "The audience exposed to the research has learned something new and/or its prior beliefs on the topic have been changed." The editors agreed that researchers do a good job of picking the appropriate journal (e.g., sending a manuscript with a retailing focus to the *Journal of Retailing*). However, numerous editors stated that developing scholars often do not articulate *who* will be impacted by the research. For instance, Roland Rust suggested the idea of a *stakeholder*: "To be a contribution, a paper has to change the mind and/or behavior of a stakeholder." In a similar fashion, Barton Weitz emphasized the marketing community and added, "Research that makes significant contributions typically has (1) a strong theoretical framework and (2) addresses an issue or problem that is important to the marketing community."

Rajan Varadarajan further developed this theme by suggesting a constituency perspective. He outlined five different stakeholders (managers, researchers, public policy officials, marketing educators, and society at large) within the marketing community who could be impacted by a paper and its contribution(s): "Research studies in marketing can be distinguished on the basis of their contributions to the advancement of *practice of marketing* and/or *research in marketing*. In this context, distinguishing between specific constituencies, who might benefit from a research study, might be desirable."

An important implication of this theme is that a contribution is not independent of its audience. A paper can make a strong contribution for one constituency and little or no contribution to another constituency. A paper can profoundly impact practice but have little theoretical relevance. A paper may be very useful to a small constituency but have little utility for most individuals within a broader constituency. Hence, key questions for any author are (1) who is the constituency for the paper (2) how important and useful is the contribution of the paper to that constituency and (3) how well does a given journal match that specific constituency?

Contribution subjectivity

> *The notion of a 'contribution to knowledge' is an elusive one. Ask ten editors and expect ten different answers* (Richard Lutz).

One of the more challenging aspects in the review process is the subjective nature involved in determining what constitutes a contribution and how large that contribution is. Multiple editors acknowledged subjectivity such as Michael Levy and Dhruv Grewal (2007, p. 249): "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." Ronald Hill concurred stating, "Like 'beauty,' [a contribution] is in the eye of the beholder. For example, one reviewer gets excited about gains in a particular area, while another feels that little value is added to the field. In the end, it is the editor's job to be the arbitrator."

The double-blind journal review process can be described as a conversation among three parties: the author, the editor, and the reviewers. All three parties have an opinion on the quality and the magnitude of a contribution; however, it is the editor who makes the final decision. James Stock described the interplay between the editor and the reviewers: "I believe that there is some truth to the generalization that 'Editors look for reasons to accept manuscripts, while reviewers look for reasons to reject them.' If an Editor really believes that a submission is significant, he/she will do what they can to get it published. Fatal flaws will never be ignored, but if there are none, then Editors will try to shepherd the submission through the process so that it eventually gets published. The process then becomes one of 'continuous improvement.'"

Michael Dorsch elaborated on this interplay between the editor and the reviewers by suggesting that the reviewers evaluate a manuscript's *absolute contribution* by determining if the manuscript extends the existing knowledge about a phenomenon (e.g., the study was conducted in a new context; the study examines a new or different relationship; etc.). By contrast, the editor evaluates a paper's *relative contribution* by examining how the contribution compares to other research efforts in the literature stream.

As presented in a Table 2, opinions about the absolute and relative contribution of a paper result in a clearly acceptable manuscript only when both are positive. Low absolute and low relative contribution will result in an unambiguous rejection of a manuscript. In either of the two other cells where the absolute and relative contributions differ, the editor will make the final decision, though editors differ in their willingness to overrule a strong consensus among reviewers.

While the subjective nature of the review process cannot be avoided, by no means did any of the editors' comments suggest that authors should view the review process in terms of luck, fate, randomness, or serendipity. By contrast, the editors stressed that it is the author's responsibility to make a persuasive and conclusive contribution argument with the first submission. After all, it is the author's promotion and tenure record that is at stake. Dorsch stated, "Recognizing that a contribution may be assessed on different dimensions (e.g., absolute vs. relative), is only part of the story; it is also important to recognize that a contribution may not be readily apparent to the editor, reviewer, or journal reader. As a result, the manuscript must be efficiently and effectively crafted so that its contribution is clearly and convincingly established." George Zinkhan suggested that developing scholars can achieve higher quality contributions when greater harmonies exist among the manuscript's elements: "Some reviewers claim that this is a subjective judgment. In other words, they know quality when they see it. Quality involves simplicity and harmony and parsimony. There should be harmony between: objectives, theory, hypotheses, methods, inferences, and implications."

Multiple editors emphasized that developing scholars should concentrate on their writing efforts even if that means hiring a proofreader or copy editor. Rigorous methods and significant results will still fail in the review process if the author cannot articulate the contribution of the paper in a clear and persuasive manner. Robert Lusch suggested: "If you cannot communicate your message with clarity, insight, persuasiveness, and impact then the topic

Table 2 Relative vs. absolute contribution

		Reviewer's Opinion Absolute Contribution	
		Low	High
Editor's Opinion Relative Contribution	Low	Clear Rejection	Editor Decision
	High	Editor Decision	Clear Acceptance

and technique are of little consequence. If you develop a unique theoretical insight, properly empirically test this insight, and obtain convincing results but you fail to communicate effectively with the written word, then you will fail in publishing your contribution in an appropriate journal. If you happen to be doing scholarly writing that is non-empirically based, then writing quality is even more important."

The final comment on this second common theme helps bridge the second theme (subjectivity) with the third theme (passion). Rejection is unavoidable in the review process especially among the most general and rigorous journals. Rejection can occur for many reasons. Perhaps the author did not present a clear and compelling exposition of the contribution of their paper. Perhaps, in the opinion of the reviewers and editor, the changes required to improve a paper and strengthen its contribution were too great to warrant further review. Time and time again the editors stressed, "*Don't give up*." The review process may not be easy or fun, but it is necessary in academia. Michael Levy and Dhruv Grewal (2007, p. 249) suggested picking research topics that you love. There is a greater chance that a scholar will persevere through the review process if the research topic is one s/he loves: "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—that is, choosing a topic that fascinates you—you should be willing to continue to fight to get it published." Therefore, it remains incumbent on authors to present strong arguments for the relevancy of their contributions to specific constituencies.

Passion for the research topic

> *So what do I recommend? The road less traveled? Well, you have many choices as a scholar, none of which assures success. Thus, you might as well take an exciting path that has a greater likelihood of being personally stimulating and potentially rewarding. No one said it would be easy but it can be fun!* (Ronald Hill).

Some of the best advice ever imparted to us was to work on research you love. Work on research that is so interesting that it keeps you up at night. Work on research in which you truly have a passion. This advice was clearly evident across the editors' essays. Beyond the perseverance required to survive the review process, academic research rarely provides instant gratification. More often than not, years will elapse between the conceptualization of a paper and a completed article appearing in print. Continuing with their thoughts from the previous section, Michael Levy and Dhruv Grewal (2007, p. 248) stated: "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."

While stressing the importance of having a passion for a research topic, many editors emphasized the parallel importance of programmatic research. Focusing on a specific domain of inquiry provides the opportunity to develop depth of understanding and expertise on a particular research topic. In addition, focusing on a specific domain helps in "branding" oneself in the literature. Barton Weitz favors programmatic research and discourages topic hopping: "A critical issue is what can a researcher do to make a significant contribution? Research on creativity suggests two factors contribute to the creative outputs: (1) domain knowledge and (2) intrinsic interest. Applying these factors to academic researchers, to make a creative contribution, researchers need extensive knowledge in the problem domain and an inherent interest in the issue. Thus, high impact research is more likely to be produced by researchers who do multiple projects in a domain of personal interest than a researcher who flits from one hot topic to another." Roland Rust agrees and suggests authors should not only avoid topic hopping but glean ideas from practice as well as from the academic literature: "Many of the most useful contributions come from real industry problems, rather than hunting around for an application area for some pet theory or technique. The problem should drive the approach—not the other way around."

Richard Lutz provided a useful summary comment on this theme of passion and its relationship to programmatic research. Lutz states: "[An] essential step for making a contribution is complete immersion in the research domain. You are unlikely to make a contribution by 'dabbling' in a number of topic areas. If you are conducting research in more than two or at the very most three distinct areas, you are unlikely to make a meaningful contribution. Focus is imperative. Read the literature, both current and classic. Talk with leading researchers in the area at conferences. Bounce your ideas off them. Ask if they will read and comment on your research ideas and/or manuscripts."

Surprise

> *When viewing what is a contribution or not, the most significant contributions create what I call the "wow, that's really neat" response from reviewers and readers* (James Stock).

A significant contribution in a paper is often characterized by an element of surprise. Doing something *new* is necessary, but not sufficient to make a significant contribution. Doing something *interesting* is necessary, but not sufficient to make a significant contribution. Simply put, if the goal is to make a contribution in one of marketing's top journals, an element of surprise should be part of the effort. In the words of Robert Lusch, "A contribution is also a direct function of the surprise it presents to the reader. Very simply, if I read a manuscript and I am not surprised then there is no or little contribution. Surprise is not a dichotomous variable, but is continuous and ranges from small to large surprises. It is the large surprises that make the best contribution. These are articles that the reader sits back and says to him or herself: (1) wow, I wish I had thought about that before; (2) that is a counterintuitive and insightful result; (3) that is not what I expected but I am now convinced that is how things work or might work; or (4) that really changes how I will practice marketing or how public policy should develop."

The editors were virtually uniform in suggesting that scholars often fail to follow up on and investigate a surprising result. For instance, researchers often investigate a set of hypotheses and just report whether or not support was found at some level of significance (e.g., <0.05). But, as Anthony DiBenedetto suggests: "An article that makes a valid contribution may have just the right amount of surprise! Suppose you hypothesize that A leads to B, B leads to C, C leads to D. If you find support for all of these, that's just great. But what if C doesn't always lead to D (everything else works fine)? Maybe there's a moderating variable or some sort of condition that the existing literature stream has ignored so far? Maybe the relationship is more complex than expected? It is so frustrating to read an article where the C-to-D relationship doesn't come out, and the authors don't even try to elaborate. They've failed to capitalize on the most important, and surprising, finding of the whole study!"

In addition to the word *surprise*, the word *counterintuitive* was also shared among the editors' essays. It is not uncommon, especially when an author does a thorough literature review and develops strong hypotheses based on that literature that the empirical results appear natural or expected. As Ronald Hill explains, unexpected findings often make a contribution: "From my experience, the very best manuscripts do one or more or the following: (1) they are built upon sound theory but take an unexpected twist [and] (2) sometimes they find a counterintuitive way of combining theory across disciplines or uncover nuances that remained undetected."

Controversy was another word within the theme of surprise that arose from the editors' essays. For example, one set of articles may find strong support for a specific effect while another set of articles on the same topic fails to find support for this same effect. Over time, disagreement builds within the research stream resulting in the need for research that addresses the reasons for the conflicting findings. George Zinkhan described the role of resolving controversy and its relationship to making a contribution: "Contribution is related to the idea of 'something new under the sun.' An article can stimulate the reader to see the world in a different way. It can provide a new perspective. It can suggest solutions for solving managerial problems. It can have implications for broadening or expanding the field of marketing. An article can provide a way to resolve existing contradictions or controversies in the field."

Roland Rust suggested controversy and conflicting findings in the literature are positive because they indicate that researchers' thinking patterns may be changing: "This means that something that is well known, but not surprising is not a contribution. Controversy is good, because that indicates that minds are being changed. Likewise something that is interesting, but results in no changes in the reader, is not a contribution."

Eric Arnould offered a useful concluding comment on this theme. He suggested doing something unexpected or different from the majority of papers in the literature can make a paper stand out. Arnould advocates research that employs logic other than deduction: "Figuring out whether or not one's empirical study makes a contribution to theory often turns on whether or not the results are interesting. Interestingness has been discussed in a charming article by Davis (1971). In this article, he shows that there are a number of ways to make an interesting contribution, only one of which might be a test of a deductively derived relationship between variables."

Strategies for making a contribution

Three domains

As implied in the quotation that introduced this paper, making a contribution is not an easy task. A number of editors suggested various strategies a scholar might employ to maximize the likelihood that a paper contains and clearly articulates a meaningful contribution. In his essay, Rajan Varadarajan observed that "making a contribution to knowledge in the field of marketing can be viewed from different" perspectives. Contributions can take a number of different forms and it is useful for an author to consider the type of contribution they are attempting to make. For example, Brinberg and McGrath (1985) suggest three domains in which an author might make a contribution. The first is the conceptual domain, which offers explanations of a phenomenon of interest (also known as the theory component of an article). The second domain is the methodological. Most empirical papers include research methods for studying the phenomenon of interest and a contribution may reside in a new approach to the study of a phenomenon. The third domain is the substantive domain, which is the range of the phenomenon of interest (also known as the study's context). As illustrated in Fig. 1, the intersection of these three interwoven domains (simplified to *Theory, Method* and *Context*) is the place most likely to produce a strong contribution. While the best papers feature contributions in all three of these domains, most manuscripts make a significant contribution in one or two domains. For the aspiring author the key to success is assuring that there is an important and meaningful contribution in at least one of these domains for some constituency. This also brings us full circle—a contribution in one of these domains may be more or less important and relevant to a specific constituency. It is critical that the domain of the contribution match the focus of the target journal and its readership.

The majority of empirical papers in the academic literature or marketing includes theory, method, and context components. Conceptual papers usually do not feature a methodological component, which often makes these articles the most difficult to get published. The theory and the context contributions must to be strong enough to stand on their own without data. A common strategy in writing a paper and identifying its contribution is to identify a "gap" in the literature and justify a contribution by filling in the gap. While a gap might exist, it does not logically follow that filling a gap is an important contribution. In fact, gaps may exist precisely because the issue is uninteresting or obvious. The marketing discipline is not very old, so more gaps exist than published articles. On this point Barry Babin observed, "The fact that 'no researcher has tested this before' does not logically justify the need for such a test." When a gap does exist it is not always obvious why filling the gap is important. It is an author's responsibility to tell the target audience why filling the gap is relevant and meaningful. On this point Barton Weitz noted, "As an editor and reviewer, I am concerned when authors claim their contribution will fill a gap in the literature—no one previously has looked at the relationship between *X* and *Y*—but the authors never discuss why anyone should be interested in the relationship between *X* and *Y*."

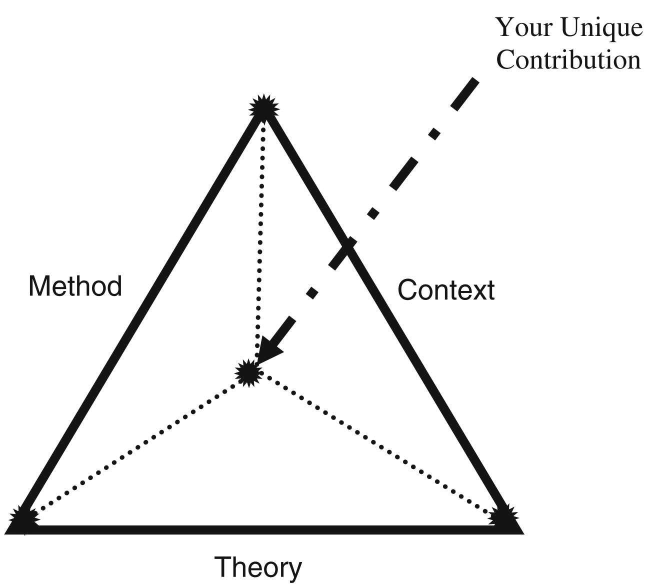

Figure 1 Three contribution domains

In contrast to simply filling a gap in the literature, the elegance of Brinberg and McGrath's (1985) perspective on the domains of potential contributions provides a richer and more compelling way to think about what defines a contribution. Papers that offer highly generalizable insights that are meaningful and useful to broad constituencies are most likely to contain a strong contribution. This is one reason that papers that make a contribution to theory have the best chance of being published in the top journals. The leading journals in marketing, and in most academic disciplines, tend to have an academic editor, academic reviewers, and academic readers and these constituents are more often than not, interested in theoretical advances than contributions to the other domains. But, this is more than just a matter of preference for theory over other domains. By definition the insights of a good theory should transcend specific methods and context. In contrast, empirical research is generally limited by method and context. In the words of Eric Arnould, "In most cases at academic journals, a contribution refers to a contribution to theory. Thus, the application of a theory to a novel context is often questioned for failing to make a contribution." If a theory is directly borrowed from marketing, psychology, or economics and not extended, refined, or limited by boundary conditions, then the contribution to theory is minimal and the manuscript is likely to contain a modest contribution at best.

It is possible to make a contribution methodologically by creating a new method or by refining an existing method. Publications like the *Journal of Marketing Research* and the *International Journal of Research in Marketing* have this goal as part of their mission. There are journals in other disciplines, such as statistics, psychometrics, and management science that are exclusively devoted to methodological contributions. Most journals in marketing, however, will not publish a paper where the only contribution is methodological (e.g., the *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*). In these cases, the contribution to method must be part of a paper that also includes a contribution to theory and/or contribution to context. Reviewing a journal's mission statement, reading editors' articles, and attending *meet-the-editor* sessions at conferences are excellent ways to ascertain the focus of a journal.

Contributions defined solely in terms of context are rarely sufficient to merit publication in leading marketing journals. As noted in the discussion of *target audience*, strong research indicates who will be impacted (e.g., marketing managers, public policy officials, society at large, etc.,) by a study's findings. Yet, articles that directly borrow a previously developed theory and use a well established method in a novel context do not necessarily warrant publication in the leading journals. On the other hand, there are a host of marketing journals that define their focus in terms of contributions to context. Such contexts may be defined in terms of geography, industry, marketing activity, type of customer, or reader interest, among others. In these publications, a contribution to context is perhaps the most important component of the manuscript. There is almost always a home for a well conceived and well written paper.

The contribution continuum

Just as there is a continuum of journals from the most general to those that are more methodological or context specific, there is also a continuum of contributions an author can make from identical replication to developing a new theory that predicts a new phenomenon (see Fig. 2).

Donald Lehmann believes the various positions on the continuum are differentiated by the degree of innovation manuscripts offer: "This ranges from exact replication through incremental (i.e., one thing at a time variation) to noticeable (i.e., changes several aspects) to discontinuous (breakthough, really new)."

On the far left axis of the continuum (position 1) are identical replications. These studies replicate a previously executed study to determine whether or not the results hold. Although replications do make a contribution by illustrating previous results are sound, there is little new beyond the replication to advance the literature in this area. Failure to replicate is even more problematic because there are many uninteresting reasons that can produce such a failure, including use of a different sample, unintended variation in measures, and different context, among others. While identical replications are rarely seen in the published literature (but often find a place on conference programs), replication and extension (position 2) is a common contribution found in the literature, though often not in leading journals. Such replications and extensions are really contributions to context. By showing that a previously demonstrated effect is not the result of chance or a one-of-a-kind event and by expanding, refining, or limiting the contexts in which the effect occurs theory by establishing boundary conditions, insight is provided and understanding is increased. Position 3, extension of a new theory or method in a new area, is very similar to replication and extension. Replication and extension extend theory developed and examined in previous work.

The integrative review (position 4) is another way to make a contribution although this type of contribution is not as common as positions 2 or 3, at least in the marketing literature. One approach to the integrative review takes the form of a conceptual paper with propositions. Such propositions may serve to integrate and organize prior research in new and useful ways. Meta-analyses would fall in this category of paper, but it is possible to develop new insights from an integrative review of a literature without a formal meta-analysis. Often, such propositions identify new opportunities for empirical research that had not been previously identified. An integrated review "can provide a way to resolve existing contradictions or controversies in the field" (George Zinkhan). David Glen Mick agrees: "Aside from contributions that add to knowledge or change prior beliefs, there is a possibility of making a contribution that solidifies knowledge (where, perhaps, prior beliefs are weakly held or based on inclusive and controversial evidence)." On the other hand, a literature review that is just a description of previous studies seldom makes much of a contribution, especially for the constituency that already knows the relevant literature well.

A clever way to make a contribution is to develop a new theory to explain an old phenomenon (position 5). With this strategy, a new theoretical explanation is developed to explain the same effect previously reported in the literature. In classic theory testing mode, it is also possible to directly compare a previously established theory with the newly developed theory to see which has better results (e.g., variance explained, etc.).

The vast majority of academics can achieve promotion and tenure using one or more of the strategies described in positions 2 through 5. Given the relatively short window of time for promotion and tenure review (in most cases 5 to 7 years) and the relatively long window of time to move a paper from conception to publication (2 to 4 years on average), it is very practical for many academics to focus on these strategies, at least early in a career. Articles with rigorous theoretical development and sound methodological efforts employing one or more of the strategies described in positions 2 though 5 appear in every issue of the leading

1) Straight replication
2) Replication and extension
3) Extension of a new theory/method in a new area
4) Integrative review (e.g., meta-analysis)
5) Develop a new theory to explain an old phenomenon - compete one theory against another - classic theory testing
6) Identification of a new phenomenon
7) Develop a grand synthesis - integration
8) Develop a new theory that predicts a new phenomenon (e.g., the theory of relativity)

1. 2. 3. 4. 5. 6. 7. 8.

Source: Dr. John C. Mowen. Used with permission.

Figure 2 A Contribution continuum

journals in marketing. Raymond “Buddy” LaForge thought these positions can be considered the middle of the continuum: “The middle of the continuum is the longest and most research projects and published articles fit into this area. Previous research provides a foundation, but the research extends prior work in some meaningful way. It is important to synthesize the relevant literature to summarize what has been done and is known in an area, and then to present a strong argument as to how the current research adds to the knowledge base in the area.”

The far right of the continuum, positions 6 to 8, clearly fit Donald Lehmann’s description of “discontinuous.” As described by LaForge, these contributions are the most challenging: “At the other end of the continuum are the major contributions. These are often difficult to publish, because the research introduces new ideas, perspectives, methodologies, etc. that do not fit or build directly on the research on the research foundation in an area. Because of the difficulty of getting this type of research published, few marketing scholars focus on this type of research. This is unfortunate. My judgment is that the marketing area needs much more attention to innovative research that could produce unique insights that would drive, rather than follow, marketing thought and practice.” Such groundbreaking papers require enormous creativity and hard work. They are also high risk and often take years to appear in the literature. Nevertheless, this is the type of contribution sought and rewarded by the leading research universities.

The first of these three major contribution strategies is the identification of a new theory (position 6). This new theory would not extend, refine, or limit (via boundary conditions) any previous theory that has appeared in the literature. By contrast, the new theory should stand on its own and be relatively unique in comparison to any other theories in the social disciplines. In essence, this new theory would begin a new stream of literature creating the foundation for future research to build upon.

It is also possible to make a major contribution via a grand synthesis, integrating a number of sound theories into a cohesive whole (position 7). With this strategy, multiple independent theories become the elements of a model to explain some phenomenon of interest. We place emphasis on the idea of *independent* and *distinct* theories as multiple similar theories would all explain too familiar of a phenomenon. One classic example of this strategy is the Howard–Sheth model of buyer behavior (Howard and Sheth 1969). Robert Bartels provides another example. Although not nearly as popular as his *History of Marketing Thought* text, Robert Bartels (1970) was also a proponent of this strategy and wrote a book titled *Marketing Theory and Metatheory* using the concept of meta-analysis and applying it to theory development.

The final position on the continuum is reserved for the best and the brightest physical and social science thinkers. In addition, many authors who have made a contribution at this level have earned international accolades such as the Nobel Prize for their research. This strategy, (position 8) is to develop a new theory that predicts a new phenomenon such as the theory of relativity. Research at this level does not only create a new stream within a discipline, but also disrupts all work within the discipline just as quantum mechanics impacted physics. Psychologists, who have made enormous contributions to marketing thought, have won the Nobel Prize. Perhaps, in time, a marketer will also be so honored.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to better inform and elucidate the elusive concept of a contribution to the literature. With the help of past and present editors, we attempt to clarify what is meant by a contribution, to illustrate how a contribution impacts a manuscript’s publishing opportunities, and to develop a continuum of the forms and types of contributions that exist. In closing, we highlight comments from editors that speak to the “big picture” of manuscript development. A. Parasuraman outlined a checklist of elements that tend to characterize rigorous, publishable research based on a strong contribution. In his essay, a paper with a truly significant contribution will:

(a) Succinctly summarize—*and synthesize*—insights from past studies related to the topic,
(b) Clearly suggest (early in the paper) what the paper’s contribution is beyond what is already known,
(c) Use a theoretically and methodologically rigorous approach for investigating the issue(s),
(d) Succinctly discuss the findings from the investigation,
(e) Compellingly demonstrate how insights from the findings add to current knowledge by offering new theoretical, methodological and/or practical insights, and
(f) Acknowledge—and build on—the current investigation’s limitations, and suggest issues and directions for further scholarly inquiry.

Michael Levy and Dhruv Grewal (2007, p. 250) listed a set of questions an author could ask oneself to avoid the dreaded “*so what?*” response. They suggest, “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've 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?

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