

## Introduction to the special issue: strategic marketing – new horizons in theory and research

The origins of strategic marketing as a field of study date back at least to the 1970s, when strategic planning began to gain importance in companies (Jain, 1983). Others suggest that it is traceable back as to the introduction of the marketing concept itself (Drucker, 1954; McKittrick, 1957). Early in the 1980s, a series of seminal articles (Anderson, 1982; Day and Wensley, 1983; Jain, 1983) provided the first solid push towards establishing the research domain that presently encompasses:

[...] the study of organizational, inter-organizational and environmental phenomena which are of crucial importance to organizations from the standpoint of their long-term performance, and concerned with: the behaviors of organizations in the marketplace in their interactions with consumers, customers, competitors and other external constituencies in the context of the creation, communication and delivery of products that offer value to customers in exchanges with organizations, and the general management responsibilities of the marketing function in organizations that align with its boundary spanning role (Varadarajan, 2015, p. 86).

## Mostly growth but also a few bumps along the road

During the past three decades, strategic marketing topics – building on several streams of research, most notably marketing, strategic management and industrial/organisational (I/O) economics (Varadarajan, 2010, 2015) – have gained a strong foothold in the marketing literature. An analysis of articles published in strategic marketing between 1983 and 2015 shows a general growing trend for the discourse (Figure 1). However, in recent years, growth in the number of published studies has stopped, and in 2013–2015, the numbers even show slight decline. Some scholars argue that this negative trend for strategic marketing (while simultaneously econometric modelling and consumer behaviour studies in marketing have gained in popularity) represents an “identity crisis” of the field (Reibstein *et al.*, 2009; Varadarajan, 2010; Hunt, 2015). To us, the negative trend also suggests that the field of marketing in general has struggled to successfully find a solid balance between academic rigour and managerial relevance, a combination that arguably is required from the current academicians in business studies (Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006; Jaworski, 2011).

The figure also illustrates that the growth of strategic marketing as a research domain has not been without bumps along the road. After the initial push (Anderson, 1982), the number of articles within the domain remained at a relatively low level for almost a decade. It was not until the early 1990s that a spike occurred with the growing interest in market orientation (Kohli and Jaworski, 1990; Narver and Slater, 1990). At the beginning of the new millennium, these themes could not carry the domain anymore,

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**Figure 1.**  
Number of published  
articles in  
peer-reviewed  
journals 1983-2015

and the research field was diminishing. Fortunately, another clear growth period began in the mid-2000s, likely sparked by the beginning of extensive discourses on strategic organisational re-imagining via a service dominant logic in marketing (Vargo and Lusch, 2004) and customer profitability management (Johnson and Selnes, 2004). Current, slightly decreasing numbers in publishing activity suggest that once again, new research avenues need to be identified and exploited. Historically, strategic marketing has always been able to bounce back and thrive again. But as history often poorly predicts the future, should we expect growth or decline for the domain going forward?

### Outlook for the strategic marketing domain

Despite a bump downward in 2014-2015, several recent points of evidence portend increased publication activity within the strategic marketing domain. For one, in his opening editorial as incoming editor of the *Journal of Marketing*, Kumar (2015, p. 6) laid down the gauntlet suggesting that marketing now “occupies a much more central role in organisations”. His perspective implies that marketing holds potential for being more involved in strategic decision making, not only within the marketing function but also at the firm level. This eventuality is supported by marketing’s boundary-spanning role and interfaces towards customers, other parts of organisation, competitors and the external business environment overall (Varadarajan, 2010). The rapidly increasing availability of data to gain customer insights and enhance marketing accountability offers a fertile soil for strategic marketing studies (Hanssens and Pauwels, 2016), which is evident also in the articles of this special issue as many of them touch the accountability theme.

*AMS Review* also recently dedicated much of an issue to conceptual work in strategic marketing and marketing strategy. In that issue, Hunt (2015) discusses the role that resource-advantage (R-A) theory plays in strategic marketing, whereas Varadarajan (2015) follows up on his prior work (Varadarajan, 2010) to revisit and clarify what the domain of strategic marketing is and what it is not. In the previously mentioned *Journal*



*of Marketing* editorial, Kumar (2015) also alerts that we are approaching an era where marketing's strategic role in organisations increases rather than diminishes, as, for instance, marketers are facing increasing pressure to demonstrate the effectiveness and efficiency of marketing activities and to effectively manage customer attitudes and engagement (rather than focusing solely on customer behaviour and short-term transactions). In addition, Marketing Science Institute's (MSI) top five research priorities for 2016-2018 all include elemental facets of the strategic marketing world view (MSI, 2016). A recent special issue of the *Journal of Marketing* (Volume 80, Number 6 – November 2016) was themed around the MSI research priorities and included articles full of fascinating and potentially lucrative research avenues for the future of the field.

Taken collectively, these high-profile examples are all excellent news for strategic marketing scholars, and the potentially increasing role of strategic marketing also shows in the level of interest through submissions to this *European Journal of Marketing* special issue. Consequently, we see the future of strategic marketing as very bright.

### Summary of the articles in the special issue

A central aim of this special issue is to further the dialogue on strategic marketing in a substantive way, through both theoretical development and empirical testing. Now that we have the issue in our hands, we believe it indeed addresses new research directions in the field of strategic marketing as well as adds important new knowledge to the field. As special issue guest editors, we are very pleased with the robust turnout of submissions, and we are proud to present the eight articles herein that comprise a highly diverse, value-adding and contemporary set of perspectives on the domain of strategic marketing. Below, we provide a capsule summary of those eight articles.

The first article, by Michael Krush, Raj Agnihotri and Kevin Trainor, tackles the very timely topic of marketing accountability and its potential benefits for companies. In “A contingency model of marketing dashboards and their influence on marketing strategy implementation speed and market information management capability”, the authors provide an important contribution to a theme empirically still in its infancy by testing the mechanism through which marketing dashboards aid in improving market performance. Specifically, they argue that market information management capability and marketing strategy implementation speed serve as such mechanisms. Indeed, it seems to us that developments such as this are necessary, should marketing want to become “an integral part of organisational decision-making framework” (Kumar, 2015, p. 4).

The second article, by Lee Quinn, Sally Dibb, Lyndon Simkin, Ana Canhoto and Mathew Analogbe, discusses the challenges posed by the evolving technological landscape for marketing and its role within organisations. In “Troubled waters: The transformation of marketing in a digital world”, the authors elaborate on the opportunities and threats that digital marketing, big data and advances in analytics, for example, provide. From qualitative interviews, they identify key changes in how marketing is viewed and practiced in firms. Although the authors argue that there clearly are barriers that impede strategic integration of marketing, they stress that marketing needs to take charge of technological changes and help organisations become more market-led.



The third article, by Imran Currim, Jooseop Lim and Yu Zhang, focuses on the long-term implications of marketing spending. The topic is important, as many companies still see cuts from the marketing budget as a suitable solution when encountering financial distress. In “Commitment to marketing spending through recessions: Better or worse stock market returns?”, the authors examine how the economic cycle affects marketing spending decisions and whether those companies committed to spending through recessions achieve better stock market performance. Using an impressive set of panel data, they find that economic recessions are associated with a short-term decrease in marketing spending and report that commitment to marketing spending through recessions is positively associated with long-term stock market returns. Their findings suggest that marketing spending should be viewed strategically as an *investment* and not as a cost.

The fourth article, by Sanja Pekovic and Sylvie Rolland, takes into consideration sustainability and corporate social responsibility as new developments in society (Kumar, 2015; Korschun *et al.*, 2014). In “Customer orientation and firm’s business performance: A moderated mediation model of environmental customer innovation and contextual factors”, the authors introduce the environmental customer innovation concept and empirically demonstrate that it serves as an important mediator between customer orientation and business performance. Although a focus on environmental innovations with potential for customer benefits indeed seems to be an important performance mechanism for contemporary firms, the evidence suggests that the performance outcomes are contingent on, among others, market environment and firm size.

The fifth article, by Andrew Thoeni, Greg Marshall and Stacy Campbell, tackles a managerially crucial topic of strategic segmentation, which has gained surprisingly limited theoretical attention. Despite their theory development potential, conceptual pieces in strategic marketing are presently rather rare (a notable exception being the recent *AMS Review* issue), so we were happy to see one solid conceptual work published in this issue. In “A resource-advantage theory typology of strategic segmentation”, the authors build on resource-advantage theory to develop a typology of strategic segmentation, which suggests that resource availability affects managers’ strategic market view and approach. The article provides nine theoretically derived propositions on effective strategic segmentation and potential performance differentials, setting the stage for future empirical research. It well acknowledges potential negative implications of short-term segmentation decisions, providing a valuable addition to the contents of the special issue.

The sixth article, by Emir Agic, Merima Činjurević, Emir Kurtovic and Muris Cicic, focuses on market-based resources and marketing capabilities. In “Strategic marketing patterns and performance implications”, the authors well use methodological developments to identify configurations of such resources and capabilities and to analyse their relationship with business performance. They identify distinct organisational profiles and provide an illustration of “bundles” or “recipes” that are associated with certain levels of performance and go on to identify different resource-capability bundles associated with similar performance outcomes. Importantly, contributions such as this – via introducing methods not previously used to solve marketing problems (Frösén *et al.*, 2016) – add to the understanding about the



interplay and synergies between key strategic marketing concepts, as well as allow for analyses of complex strategic marketing phenomena.

The seventh article, by Linda Laursen and Poul Andersen, is a prime example of bridging the gap between academia and business practice in that it brings novel insights to the discussion on open innovation. In “Innovation summits at LEGO, Unilever, Novozymes and HEINEKEN: Comparison and conceptualisation”, the authors adopt a micro perspective and, in doing so, importantly bring more detail to our understanding about the process through which open innovation and value co-creation occur. Drawing on comparative case studies, they present a typology of innovation summits and argue that innovation summits can be seen as an important strategic marketing initiative. Importantly, the article opens the door wide for a discussion about the role of strategic marketing when organisations engage in innovation activities beyond their boundaries.

The eighth and final article, by Johanna Frösén and Henriikki Tikkanen, provides a useful analysis of the trends and impact of key strategic marketing constructs over time. In “Development and impact of strategic marketing: A longitudinal study in a Nordic country from 2008 to 2014”, the authors stress the importance of accounting for the impact of strategic marketing in the context of the prevailing economic environment. They find support for market orientation increasingly becoming a hygiene factor for firms, and for marketing performance measurement being beneficial for performance across the business cycle. Interestingly, their findings suggest that the effectiveness of marketing-related capabilities varies over the changing business cycle, which gives rise to managerially relevant suggestions on which aspects of strategic marketing firms should devote their resources and efforts to in varying stages of the business cycle.

### **Future considerations**

From an academic institutional perspective, as part of its recently unveiled “intellectual agenda”, the American Marketing Association (AMA) highlighted “7 big problems for the marketing industry” (Jaworski *et al.*, 2016). As the name suggests, the AMA’s intellectual agenda highlights seven “issues that matter most to marketers”. On close examination, the list is heavily weighted towards strategic issues for marketers (e.g. effectively targeting high value sources of growth, the role of marketing in the firm and the c-suite, the digital transformation of the modern corporation, generating and using insight to shape marketing practice, dealing with an omnichannel world, competing in dynamic, global markets and balancing incremental and radical innovation).

Having read (and re-read) this list a number of times, an incredible sense of *déjà vu* occurs. Are these particularly new issues? Are they particularly “21st century” challenges? Certainly, levels of change, unpredictability and “turbulence” are perceived to be increased; hence, marketers have new challenges presently – but in the main, this list does not seem to reflect a seismic shift in paradigms (indeed AMA makes no claims that they do). However, the fact that it is very clear that marketing practitioners feel ill-equipped to deal with these important, central and apparently perennial issues leads one to logically conclude that prior research has not fully addressed these issues; the issues are so fast-paced that any research insights rapidly decline in usefulness; the connections between those doing the research and those practicing marketing are weak, thus knowledge transfer processes have been inadequate; or a combination of the above. What appears to be fundamentally missing are deeper, more widespread, active and



meaningful connections across and among the domain elements of strategic marketing, as they are explicated by Varadarajan (2010, 2015).

As guest editors of this special issue on strategic marketing, we are however very positive about the future of the field and believe that many fascinating questions remain to be addressed within the research domain – stimulating studies that will be well positioned to provide rich contributions for both marketing theory and practice. Whatever the future may bring in terms of topics, we hope that research rigor and managerial relevance will be the key driving forces behind future work.

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