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Special section: advancing customer experience and big data impact via academic- practitioner collaboration

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## **Special section: Advancing customer experience and big data impact via academic-practitioner collaboration**

### **Introduction**

The “1st Academic-Practitioner Research with Impact workshop: Customer Experience Management (CEM) and Big Data”, was held at Alliance Manchester Business School on 18th and 19th January 2016. The topic of the workshop and the special section was selected deliberately, based on feedback from practitioners collected over the past fifteen years and observation of developing areas in service marketing, to encourage collaboration between practitioners and academics. The following paper discusses the purpose, planning, development, delivery and in particular the outcomes of the workshop.

We begin with a brief discussion of the importance of research impact and collaboration between academics and practitioners. We then discuss the workshop procedures and organization efforts. We subsequently provide a summary of the four papers resulting from these collaborative efforts, which follow in this special section. Finally, we discuss the implications and future directions of this type of research endeavors for practitioners and academics.

### **The important role of academic-practitioner collaborations**

The collaboration of academic and business communities is acknowledged to afford mutual benefits to those involved (Reibstein *et al.*, 2009). Practitioners gain access to a greater depth of insight than is frequently possible to achieve within the confines of a business setting (Pisano and Shih, 2009). Academics benefit from enhanced access to data, and to the dynamic

and complex issues impacting businesses (Amabile *et al.*, 2001), thus ensuring that the field is relevant and impactful. Various works promote such means of encouraging collaboration (e.g. Lilien, 2011) and highlight best practice in dissemination of insight to both academics and business recipients (Daly *et al.*, 2013). However, such collaborative endeavors are, unfortunately, not universal with proclamations of a ‘divide’ arising in marketing literature (Reibstein *et al.*, 2009). It has been identified that practitioners rarely consult academics or academic research findings when developing managerial practices and solutions for their businesses, similarly, academics rarely turn to practitioners when formulating their research questions (Bansal *et al.*, 2012; Rynes *et al.*, 2001).

Despite a tendency for academics and practitioners to work in isolation from each other, there are continuous, collaborative endeavors. The Marketing Science Institute (MSI), for instance is, “dedicated to bridging the gap between academic marketing theory and business practice”, bringing together practitioners from over 70 leading companies with leading researchers ([www.msi.org/about-msi](http://www.msi.org/about-msi)). Moreover, several leading marketing journals, including the *Journal of Services Marketing* and a recent special issue of the *Journal of Marketing* in collaboration with the AMA and MSI (Kumar *et al.*, 2016), target both practitioner and academic audiences. Such publications call for and promote research with genuine business impact, rather than just theoretical extension or methodological rigor. Increasingly, various research funding applications are also requesting a concrete impactful output of research as a major determinant of funding decisions and research assessment exercises. The Research Excellence Framework (REF) in the United Kingdom is one major example. With its recent shift from Research Assessment Exercise focusing on scholarly impact to a Research Excellence Framework (<http://www.ref.ac.uk/>) that explicitly includes the impact of the research on practice as a means for evaluating scholarly outputs. Similarly, in the United

States and a number of other countries, there is an increasing dependence on private funds within higher education. As governmental support for education is continuously declining, universities and subsequently researchers are more dependent than ever on the private sector (Heckscher and Martin-Rios, 2013).

In response to the growing need for more impactful research bridging the gap between academia and practice, Bansal *et al.*, (2012) identified several approaches to tackle this issue: (1) Evidence-based management aiming to inspire practice through research knowledge, (2) engaged scholarship, assuming that practitioners and researchers can study complex social issues by collaborating through the various research process stages and (3) relational scholarship shifting the focus of the research community to the interface of research and practice (Bartunek, 2007). We suggest that the workshop approach outlined in this paper is unique in that it aligns with aspects of all three of these approaches and offers insight for the question of “how” the gap can be bridged.

### **Workshop purpose**

Within Alliance Manchester Business School a focus on generating research with business impact is reflected, in part, through consultancy projects rooted in academic research. Recent examples of outputs include work for the British Quality Foundation (BQF) (Burton *et al.*, 2013; 2015), a study of partnership effectiveness assessment in conjunction with the Manchester Academic Health Science Centre (Diers-Lawson and Bruce, 2015), and an investigation into best practice in customer service measurement in collaboration with the Institute of Customer Service (The Institute of Customer Service, 2014). However, whilst academic engagement in consultancy projects such as these have the potential to create

impact, such work is invited, often via a tendering process, by third parties; organizational bodies, with agendas that influence and shape the outputs. Thus, in shaping research plans, there is clearly an opportunity for cutting out third parties and developing direct dialogue between practitioner actors and academics.

Academic-practitioner dialogue is an ongoing feature of the Customer Management Leadership Group (CMLG), a practitioner membership group established in 2001 and run from Alliance Manchester Business School. The CMLG is a benchmarking group for a “network of senior executives who share a passion for achieving consistent and sustainable value for their organizations by aligning the needs of customers, stakeholders, partners, employees and suppliers” (<https://research.mbs.ac.uk/customer-leadership/>). Membership is reviewed annually with new members joining each year and includes some of the world’s most renowned brands and organizations. Regular CMLG meetings are coordinated between practitioner members (company representatives in senior customer focused positions at board level or reporting directly to the board) and academics presenting current research in order to share ideas and practices. Additionally members propose research topics, to guide the development of an annual research project, leading to an unpublished research report for the members delivered by between one and three academics. Whilst this approach has been successful in contributing to the parallel development of a stream of academic research outputs (Burton, 2010; Gleaves *et al.*, 2008; Nasr *et al.*, 2014; 2015; Talwar *et al.*, 2008) these contributions are, to some extent, restricted by the research interests and foci of the limited number of researchers involved.

Thus, recognizing the impactful opportunities for co-creating academic knowledge and value through ‘gatherings’ (Tähtinen *et al.*, 2016) of academics, an innovative approach was

planned for the CMLG research project in 2016. Leveraging the academic networks of the CMLG personnel and that of CMLG collaborator Professor Thorsten Gruber, director of the Centre for Service Management (CSM) at Loughborough University ([www.lboro.ac.uk/csm](http://www.lboro.ac.uk/csm)), academics were invited to come together in Manchester in order to consider, debate and respond through developing papers to problems set directly and presented in person by practitioners. We contend that using a workshop structure, with direct individual practitioner-academic contact overcomes risks with initiatives such as the recent collaboration between the AMA and MSI (Kumar *et al.*, 2016). In particular it prevents third-parties interpreting and selecting the practitioner problems for the academics and it avoids distorted interpretation of messages that is possible when practitioner interests are presented to academics in the form of secondary data (Kumar *et al.*, 2016).

*Workshop focus: customer experience management and big data*

The “1st Academic-Practitioner Research with Impact workshop” was thus planned with CMLG members and leading academics from service marketing and other fields concerned with key topic areas identified by the practitioners (as set out below), within the overlapping areas of: customer experience management and big data. These two areas were selected due to the identification of their emerging and increasing importance by members at CMLG meetings. In particular, at the start of each year the members identify current ‘hot topics’ for their business. Interest in customer experience management has been growing over the past fifteen years and the topics of customer experience and big data have dominated these discussions over the last 7 and 4 years respectively. The significance of these areas is also highlighted by the parallel (although sometimes lagging) growing recognition of their importance by service marketing academics (Ostrom *et al.*, 2010; 2015) as underlined by

other recent academic-practitioner initiatives (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016; Wedel and Kannan, 2016).

Thus the aims of the workshop were:

1. Provide research-based advice and implications to practitioners.
2. Develop academic research and publications with strong managerial impact.
3. Be true to the aims of CMLG by bridging the gap between academics and practitioners for the benefit of both.

### **Planning, development and outputs of the workshop**

The CMLG members were invited to propose the topics that they would be willing to discuss at the January workshop. Five companies from a deliberately varied range of industries (retail, transportation, infrastructure management, banking and industrial technology manufacturing) submitted between one and three topics which were all under the common themes of customer experience management and big data. The topics were integrated into four potential groups for research development. Distinguished lead academics from three countries were identified with expertise in each of the four topics and invited to attend the workshop and act as lead authors, leading academic groups to develop a paper: Lerzan Aksoy (Fordham University, USA), Timothy L. Keiningham (St. John's University, NY, USA and Rockbridge Associates), Werner Kunz (University of Massachusetts Boston, USA), Vicky Story (Loughborough University, UK), Gianfranco Walsh (University of Hanover, Germany), and Judy Zolkiewski (University of Manchester, UK).

Subsequently, a call for participation was issued to other academic colleagues. In order to generate interests from both the UK and global academic communities, the event was promoted with help of a number of bodies and channels including: messages from CSM, Academy of Marketing ([www.academyofmarketing.org/](http://www.academyofmarketing.org/)) and SERVSIG ([www.servsig.org/](http://www.servsig.org/)) and via various social media channels. In order to encourage attendance, attendees' costs were subsidized. The application process required interested academics to submit a brief CV, statement of interest highlighting relevant experience and expertise and an indication of topic preference. Subsequently, lead authors selected their paper teams from the candidates whose research interests and topic preferences best fitted with the potential research routes. In addition to 9 company representatives, 6 invited lead academics and 2 organizers, a further twenty-six academic participants were selected from thirty-five applicants from twelve countries, making the workshop a truly international collaboration.

On the first morning, practitioners presented their research challenges to the entire workshop audience. In the afternoon, they met and discussed the topics with the academic paper teams, who were beginning to develop papers responding to these challenges. Each paper was aligned with the issues raised by between one and three practitioners, with each practitioner having at least one of their challenges as the core focus of an individual academic team's paper. The event concluded with the academics presenting draft plans to all the participants. Subsequently, the academic teams continued to work remotely on their papers, developing them for coordinated submission in September 2016 and eventual sharing with the practitioners. Academics involved in the workshop have provided unanimously positive feedback regarding the event itself and the following paper writing experience. Four papers subsequently went through a blind review process before being accepted for publication.

The first paper entitled: “The Interplay of Customer Experience and Commitment” is authored by: Timothy Keiningham, Joan Ball, Sabine Benoit, Helen L. Bruce, Alexander Buoye, Julija Dzenkovska, Linda Nasr, Yi-Chun Ou, and Mohamed Zaki. This conceptual paper synthesizes multidisciplinary literature and proposes a conceptualization of the customer experience concept by disentangling the relationship between two multidimensional constructs: customer experience and customer commitment. The paper aims at better understanding the relationship between customer commitment and customer experience and associated implications for service theory and practice. The major contribution of this paper is a derived research framework, which serves as a basis for future research into the intersection of these emerging streams of research.

The second paper entitled: “Customer Engagement in a Big Data World” is authored by: Werner Kunz, Lerzan Aksoy, Yakov Bart, Kristina Heinonen, Sertan Kabadayi, Francisco Villaroel Ordenes, Marianna Sigala, David Diaz and Babis Theodoulidis. This conceptual paper contributes to contemporary conceptualisation of customer engagement in a big data context. It does this through the development and proposal of a strategic framework (highlighting key resources and processes) that unites both the customer and company perspectives in successfully creating data driven customer engagement, thus generating value for both parties. In part this involves recognizing the combined co-creative role both customer and firm investment plays in value creation and realization from data.

The third paper entitled: “Strategic B2B Customer Experience Management: The Importance of Outcomes-Based Measures” is authored by: Judy Zolkiewski, Vicky Story, Jamie Burton, Paul Chan, Andre Gomes, Philippa Hunter-Jones, Lisa O’Malley, Linda Peters, Chris Raddats and William Robinson. This conceptual paper presents a literature review of customer

experience and highlights the paucity of B2B customer experience research. Subsequently, the paper highlights problems with data-driven customer experience management that is reliant on data that tends to be developed from things that are easy to measure. Thus, the authors propose a move away from narrowly defined, retrospective inputs-outputs measures to a focus on dynamic, interactively shaped, outcome measures as these consider performance in way that is more suited to encompassing consideration of customer experience. The paper contributes potential practitioner impact in highlighting the need for organizations to develop new capabilities to make this switch.

The fourth paper entitled: “Examining the effect of front-line and back-office employee behavior on organizational performance – the moderating role of emotional intelligence” is authored by: Treasa Kearney, Gianfranco Walsh, Willy Barnett, Taeshik Gong, Maria Schwabe and Kemefasu Ifie. This empirical paper considers whether the emotional intelligence of both back-office and front-line employees at a UK based B2B electronics manufacturer influences their behavior and impacts organizational performance outcomes relating to the customer’s experience. Partial least squares structural equation modeling was applied to estimate a conceptual model based on a sample of matched salesperson, back-office employees and customer performance data. The paper contributes to conceptual and empirical understanding of the role of emotional intelligence in shaping frontline and back-office employee behavior and subsequent customer-related performance of the organization.

In addition to the specific contributions of the papers, the workshop yielded value for academics and practitioners in a number of ways, which will be discussed now in more detail.

#### *Value for academics*

The workshop offered a great opportunity to work with leading academics and well-established research teams from a range of universities and research disciplines. The organizers aimed to include a mix of academics across teams, including early career researchers and a PhD student on every paper team in an effort to support them in developing their professional networks. This mixed experience approach facilitated learning by early career researchers from leading scholars whilst potentially also introducing fresh perspectives to established academics. One of paper teams has already presented their research to the UK Academy of Marketing conference in 2016 and we hope that all the paper collaborations will result in continuing co-authorship between the members of the four teams.

Not only did the workshop offer the opportunities for ongoing dialogue and development of research networks between international academics, but also with forward thinking, research-oriented practitioners. Access to data is one of the main challenges facing academics and this innovative type of collaborative workshop is a great source of potential data access. In addition, the workshop provided opportunity for constructive dialog between researchers and practitioners. Given the contrasting *modus operandi* of academics (requiring lengthy and detailed approaches to research investigation) and practitioners (requiring immediate clarity and action with clearly measurable results), the workshop offered a working space for both parties to learn more about each other's ontological assumptions, work processes and expectations. Bringing academics and practitioners together and facilitating dialog goes some way to countering the problem of each party's usage of distinct unfamiliar lexicon and scientific language, which can result in meaning being "lost in translation", hindering and limiting the dissemination of the evolving body of knowledge generated by researchers (Briner *et al.*, 2009).

With the rising importance of showing real-world impact, academics are faced with a stronger need to collaborate with practitioners and disseminate their findings beyond academic journals. The workshop and subsequent papers could present solutions and guidelines to many of the challenges that academics face in this respect, such as finding and phrasing research questions that are meaningful to practitioners, designing data collection tools that are suitable for today's workplace, and interpreting the results accurately within a business context.

Finally, the workshop has facilitated the production of encompassing and rich research findings specifically related to topics that both practitioners and academics identify as important. The special section thus provides current leading thinking and research agendas within the customer experience management and big data areas, based on the knowledge and expertise of practitioners facing problems in this area on a daily basis and of authors with diverse backgrounds and research interests. These outputs can serve as a basis for further research development within these key themes.

#### *Value for practitioners*

The resulting papers were based on a range of research challenges identified by five companies across a range of industrial sectors and thus offer substantial research impact as implications may influence companies across diverse contexts. Practitioner participants have been keen to receive the outputs generated by this process and some are continuing dialog with their academic teams, although it is too early to comment on any resulting impact on processes at these organizations. The opportunities presented by the outputs to this workshop are not limited to the participating companies, but extend to various businesses that are facing

similar issues in the face of the rising importance and challenges of customer experience management and big data.

We hope the workshop helped challenge some of the stigma associated with academic work within the practitioner's world, as highlighted by Bansal *et al.* (2012), and Bennis and O'Toole (2005) who complain that business schools and their MBA programs focus too much on developing and promoting rigorous 'scientific' research and not enough time considering what is important for practitioners. By engaging practitioners in the identification of research problems and creating transparency on how researchers identify research questions in order to tackle those problems, we hope to encourage practitioners to consult academics in their future enquiries.

## **Conclusion**

In order to develop richer and more impactful understanding of current problems challenging customer-focused managers there is a need for more dialog and engagement between academics and practitioners. The workshop and the resulting four papers present a unique approach to synthesizing real world problems, solving them through rigorous research and offering current leading thinking within the scientific literature. The innovative, collaborative format of the workshop and the resulting impactful papers should serve as a motivation for future advancement of similar initiatives and we call for the development of more workshops that encourage collaboration at the academic-practitioner interface in order to ensure that future research in services marketing is both credible and impactful. The commentary in this paper could serve as a guideline for developing future workshops that aim at strengthening the links between academia and the business world. We hope that more publishers will sponsor, promote and organize such events and seek to publish resulting outputs, which would also

help them maintain their own credibility in a shifting and increasingly challenging publishing environment.

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