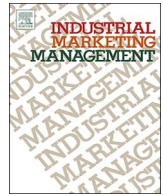




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Peter Laplaca: A case study

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ABSTRACT

Case study research is central to *Industrial Marketing Management's* (IMM) mission. Drawing on Hirsch & Levin's (1999) seminal work on the lifecycle of theoretical constructs, this article describes how sustained editorial support for theoretical exploration through case study research enabled the development of a rich and dynamic body of business-marketing theory over time. Under Peter LaPlaca, the shift from descriptive cases to theory building ensured a balance between the identification of new constructs and the development of a shared understanding of core industrial marketing constructs that drove subsequent testing and legitimation. This approach by long-time Editor-in-Chief Peter LaPlaca, occurring at a time when support for case driven worked was waning, resulted in a series of theoretical innovations that ensured the journal's subsequent influence on the wider field of marketing theory, particularly evident in the shift to a service-dominant logic.

1. Introduction

I first had the pleasure of meeting Peter LaPlaca at the 2007 *European Marketing Academy Conference* (EMAC) in Reykjavik, Iceland (kindly introduced by current IMM co-editor in chief, Adam Lindgreen). Peter was not unknown to me, as I had already benefitted from his wisdom as he helped guide four papers successfully through the review process at *Industrial Marketing Management* (IMM). At the time I remember congratulating Peter on the recognition of IMM's impact on the field of marketing (10th), managerial marketing (7th), and marketing applications (6th) in Baumgartner and Pieters' (2003) *Journal of Marketing* article on the structural influence of journals. I noted the journal had come a long way in such a short period of time, and recounted how a colleague and I responsible for drawing up a journal ranking list had struggled with IMM because we felt it was much more influential than its then social science citation index score and subjective rankings of marketing journals suggested (Hult, Neese, & Bradshaw, 1997).

In response, Peter stated that his initial goal when he took over was to build on the journal's burgeoning reputation and turn IMM into a top ten journal. Now that that was achieved, he stated the next goal was the top five. Rankings aside (and Peter was always critical of academia's heavy focus on rank and status), it is interesting to reflect on the unique path IMM took to become the leading journal in industrial marketing and one that has influenced the marketing discipline to such an extent that the field has reframed its core construct of value in terms of the service-dominant logic. Like many journals, descriptive case studies featured heavily in the founding years of IMM. However, unlike others, case research thrives to this day in IMM, although the focus and type of

case has changed. Unlike others, IMM never discarded so-called “descriptive research” in favour of what is often miss-classified as the positivist approach to science (i.e., quantitative methods). IMM's success was built on balancing theoretical exploration with issues of validity and reliability (cf. Hirsch & Levin, 1999), ensuring the development of a number of new constructs and approaches that have become taken-for-granted in industrial marketing, and the field of marketing more generally.

This article explores how Peter's support for rigorous case research ensured the field developed unique points of theoretical distinction, remained innovative and fresh, and had influence beyond the confines of industrial marketing. Although IMM has a long history of drawing on single industry/category studies using numerical and non-numerical data (i.e., case studies; Yin, 1994), for the purposes of this article, I will limit my focus to those cases in the qualitative tradition, primarily because as stated on the journal's current home page, IMM affords them prominence. To do so I will draw on Hirsch and Levin's (1999) seminal article on the legitimation of management theory, where they propose new constructs pass through a life cycle of identification and exploration, subsequent testing, and eventual legitimacy. Failure to address issues of validity often results in construct decline, while too much emphasis on issues of validity early on through measurement and deductive testing can destroy promising ideas, resulting in them being discarded before they had chance (a variation of Type II error).

Before so doing, I will comment briefly on the history of case research in IMM, the status of case research in marketing and how, unlike other journals, IMM resisted the shift away from this method, while nonetheless addressing Hirsch and Levin's (1999) validity challenge.

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2. A word on the status of case research and IMM

In this section I examine the role of case research in IMM and then reflect on the status of case research in the field more generally. I conclude the section with a discussion of how the shift in case research practice in IMM under Peter LaPlaca has resulted in robust theory, designed-in relevance, and wider disciplinary influence.

2.1. A brief history of IMM and case research

Launched in 1971, the content and editorial board make-up of IMM resembled that of many marketing journals at the time. The six editors were all B2B practitioners, while the editor-in-chief (R. Derek Metford) and supporting review board were academics, albeit ones largely located in industry-facing university research institutes. Perusing the early issues of the journal, case studies in the broadest sense (studies of an industry, firm, or context) are well represented and very much consistent with the founding era of many other marketing journals. Most of the papers consisted of descriptions of particular markets, countries, or sectors, and were heavily focused on developing normative ‘best practice’, using a variety of methods but nonetheless primarily ‘case-based’ (e.g., [Bundgaard-Nielsen, 1972](#); [Krätschmar, 1972](#)).

Regardless of the author's background, the journal's audience was clearly industry. For example, each article features a short introduction detailing the motivation and key practitioner or policy maker appeal, and although seeking to build general frameworks, the source material usually involves topical issues such as the Club of Rome's limits to growth report and its potential impact on existing marketing practice ([Medford, 1973](#)), or a review of research studies to provide an evidence-based approach to industrial-marketing ‘best’ practice (e.g., [Ferrari, 1973](#)). As evidenced in the regular letters (and opinions section) to the editor (often followed by replies), practitioners did engage with the material featured in the journal. This focus on practice, practitioner-informed research, and reliance on descriptive material defined the journal's early years.

In 1975 academic James D. Hlavacek took over as editor for IMM and streamlined the editorial board structure, removing the previous six sub-editors. The new editorial board was split 50:50 between practitioners and editors, reflective of an emerging professionalization of B2B marketing research. In line with IMM's founding, membership remained international in scope. Although the mix of papers shifted in line with academic interest in business-marketing and the emergence of statistical based analysis in business studies, the focus of the journal remained true to its founding principles, with the new editor again giving case study research a lead role¹.

Conceptual articles and in-depth case studies are highly desirable for presenting helpful and new information on the various aspects in the broad field of industrial marketing. This means we are concerned with theoretical foundations and techniques of value to practitioners and educators. ([Hlavacek, 1975, p. 287](#)).

Hlavacek was true to his word, and his editorial letters during his tenure often stressed the need for contextual sensitivity (e.g., industrial marketing in large and small firms, differences between B2C and B2B, differences in markets and sectors), usually in reference to reader feedback. This desire for contextual sensitivity, methodological pluralism, a broad interpretation of industrial marketing concerns, and international scope ensured a wide range of articles. Arguably these founding editorial principles laid the basis for modern B2B marketing theory and practice as a distinct sub-discipline of marketing, defined not simply by its context, but by distinctive buying situations, buyer behavior, and strategic scope and practice. During this time, formal

¹ This occurred in a 1975 issue that also featured the first IMM article of a young Assistant Professor named Peter LaPlaca ([Hempel & LaPlaca, 1975](#)), drawing on case examples to inform strategic planning in an environment defined by Toffler's seminal book *Future Shock*.

academic qualitative studies seeking to generalise to theory remained rare, with 17 published between 1971 and 1989 ([Beverland & Lindgreen, 2010](#)).

Both editors also established another unique-to-IMM practice – a desire for balancing knowledge exploration and generalisation. Although the mid 1970s saw the emergence of deductive research focused on generalizability (critical to the sustainability of an academic field; [Hirsch & Levin, 1999](#)), IMM continued to support exploration of not only new contexts and challenges, but also arguably incremental explorations of existing practice, usually with case studies, that resulted in a rich array of insights into B2B phenomena at a time when case research in the major academic management and marketing journals was in relative decline.

Peter LaPlaca became editor in 1994 (Volume 23 Issue 1) (ably assisted by Earl D. Honeycutt Jr.).² He immediately made a number of minor changes, such as expanding the editorial review board and offering special themed issues, while also continuing the previous emphasis on excellence and practical relevance. By October 2002 (Volume 31 Issue 7) the editorial review board was made up primarily of academics, however the balance between established and younger scholars ensured the journal's traditions remained alive and well, while adaptation to new methods, ideas and approaches ensured renewal.

Building on the fine work of his predecessors, under Peter's 21-year tenure as editor - in 2014 (Volume 43 Issue 8) he shared the role with current co-editor-in-chief Adam Lindgreen - IMM went from strength to strength. As he stated in his farewell letter, when he took over IMM was published quarterly and featured between 6 and 8 articles in each issue. The journal had just 164 submissions and like many journals outside of a small elite, struggled for papers. By 200, submissions had grown to 300 per year and in 2002 debuted in the social science citation index with a then respectable (but hardly spectacular) 0.5. On standing down, IMM enjoyed between 500 and 800 submissions annually, published 12 issues and 120–130 articles, and was ranked number four in marketing by Google statistics (top five after all). The journal's reputation remains high, especially in Europe and Australasia (where it is graded A+ by the Australian Business Deans' Council) and continues to be pluralistic in approach, supportive of novel methods, contexts, and theory, and remains undoubtedly the leading journal in industrial marketing ([LaPlaca & Lindgreen, 2016, p. 1](#)).

Although cases remained central to the journal's identity, the approach to case research shifted, largely in line with methodological debates elsewhere. In their analysis of case quality in IMM from 1971 to 2006, [Beverland and Lindgreen \(2010\)](#) identified that the number of cases published expanded dramatically during this period, and from a positivist point of view (i.e., addressing issues of reliability, validity) improved dramatically. Single cases involving reflections on personal practice gave way to in-depth explorations of single and multiple sites, often through the pioneering efforts of the *Industrial Marketing and Purchasing Group (IMP)*, and focused squarely on addressing theory, either through the identification of novel insights, expansion of existing theories, solving of paradoxical results, or generation of new theoretical frameworks. The shift to multiple cases gave way to new challenges of reporting data without losing richness, but the general view is case researchers did their utmost to ensure their work would be viewed as credible and their insights could be used by quantitative researchers interested in measurement, testing, and generalizability.

2.2. Case research and the marketing academy

Case study research occupies a curious place in the marketing academy. So much of our cherished theory and taken-for-granted myths

² He was Book Review editor in 1978, Volume 7(1) - as he stated with characteristic good humour, “one has to start somewhere” (2016, p.1), and Associate Editor in 1980 (Volume 9 Issue 1).

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