

Challenges for B-to-B Doctoral Programs:
A Commentary on “Doctoral Programs
in Business-to-Business Marketing:
Status and Prospects,”
by Erwin Danneels and Gary L. Lilien

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This paper makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of doctoral training in business-to-business marketing—its origins and the current state of development. The following comments are presented to build on some of the points made by the authors. They are designed to generate more discussion on this topic.

The first paragraph of the paper captures one of the key features of business-to-business marketing, namely, the study of exchange relationships. Given this focus, it is surprising to me that very few doctoral programs are organized around this principle. For example, while the courses in Table 5 *may* include some topics on exchange such as contracting, transaction cost economics and agency theory, there seems little in here which focuses directly on the issues and problems which business marketers face when they do business with another firm. While economists have studied this topic for many years (e.g., Williamson), marketers seem slow to build on this theoretical work. Table 6's recommended courses such as Channels, I/O Economics, Relationships/Alliances, Game Theory and Negotiation suggest some progress, but still no integrative course which would help managers to answer such a basic question as “How do we write a ‘good’ contract with our ad agency?” (Devinney and Dowling 1997).

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This brings me to the thorny question of doctoral research. There are (at least) two issues here. First, what topics and research methods should doctoral students focus on in order to position their research within the business-to-business domain? Second, should their research have direct relevance to business concerns?

If, as Danneels and Lilien suggest, the core concepts of business-to-business marketing are those of exchange and relationships, then a business-to-business doctoral thesis should either focus on these topics, or it should offer some new insights into these phenomena. These are easy criteria to stipulate, but in many cases they are difficult for a student to meet. For example, the very nature of a relationship suggests that a longitudinal research methodology is really necessary. Cross-sectional data are at best a compromise. Yet for students who have limited resources for data collection and who want to graduate within a reasonable timeframe, cross-sectional data is often their preferred source of evidence. In essence, many business-to-business doctoral programs pose to students a dilemma—do a longitudinal study, but with few resources.

As to research which will impact practitioners, the best outcome is rigor (as evidenced by technically sound research) and relevance (as evidenced by its application in business-to-business situations). How can a doctoral student/program capture both outcomes? From the student's perspective the best strategy I have seen was outlined by Professor John Little of MIT at a Marketing Science conference some years ago. He said that many of his research papers were motivated by talking to business managers and finding out what problems they were trying to solve. His experience as an academic allowed him to ground these sometimes fuzzy problems in one or more academic disciplines and thus draw on the work of others to further conceptualize the problem and work towards a solution. Many of his marketing colleagues at MIT seem to follow a similar strategy. Some of the fruits of this approach have been published in *Management Science*—a journal in which most of us would be proud to publish.

Contrast the Little-MIT strategy with the typical approach of many doctoral candidates. First they start with an exhaustive literature review. Then, after much photocopying, reading, confusion, and winnowing of the ideas they have found, a thesis topic is beaten (with the help of their supervisors) into shape. Once the thesis is written and

published it may be “discovered” by industry. If the newly-minted Doctor goes into industry the chances are somewhat higher.

The approach just described is almost the anti-thesis of Little’s successful strategy. Little, however, was by no means the first scholar to use this strategy. He followed in the footsteps of the early economists, people like John Maynard Keynes, Karl Marx, David Ricardo, and Adam Smith. These men were all intrigued by what they saw around them and much of their work was designed to answer the pressing questions of their day (Ormerod 1994).

How can business schools (academics and doctoral programs) facilitate this type of outcome? Fostering industry linkages is a good place to start, but it will not have the big academic payoffs for students and their supervisors if they can’t get their work published in the top journals. Here, journal editors and editorial boards come into play. They need to be more sympathetic to the practical problems of doing business-to-business research, and the motivation of studies from a real-world as well as an academic discipline basis. The mandatory “managerial implications” section at the end of many articles is really just tokenism. Also, the requirement of many journals for the literature review section to outweigh the “why is this topic interesting” section, can misdirect researchers and frighten away practitioner readers.

Another way to foster “applied” research is for academics, and in particular university performance-appraisal committees, to reward good applied research as much as good basic research. To see what I mean here, take a moment to list what you think that your colleagues would consider to be the top five marketing journals.

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The following journals are frequent candidates for this list: *Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Marketing Research*, *Journal of Consumer Research*, *Marketing Science*, *Management Science*, *International Journal for Research in Marketing*, and the *Journal of Retailing*. Occasionally, the *Harvard Business Review* (HBR) might sneak on to the list—but “real academics” certainly would not publish their best work in here, would they? Well, maybe they should try, because HBR is arguably the single most influential source of management ideas for practitioners, that is, most of the people involved in business-to-business marketing. If HBR is thought to be unacceptable, then some of the other outlets for this type of research such as the *California Man-*

agement Review, Sloan Management Review, Interfaces, or Long Range Planning may be acceptable.

The quickest way to get applied journals into the Marketing Top Ten is for performance-appraisal committees to (a) include some of these journals into the premier journal category (hence the Top Ten rather than the top five), and (b) weight a publication in these outlets equally with the more traditional academic journals. There is little use in asking untenured faculty to do applied research if “what counts” is publications in the traditional academic journals that practitioners have learnt to avoid. We need to follow the advice of human resource people who have observed over the years that employees tend to do what is *inspected*, in preference to what is expected.

One final observation about applied research is worth noting. Students of business and executives returning to university for short courses like seeing it being used as the basis for the ideas presented in the classroom. Up go the teaching ratings.

The following points summarize the discussion above. First, from the evidence presented by Danneels and Lilien, many doctoral programs need some integrative and customized coursework which focuses directly on the essential aspects of business-to-business marketing. (My assumption here is that exchange relationships are one [or the] core element of this discipline.) Second, we need to generate resources to help students and other academics do longitudinal research. Third, research needs to be *grounded* in both the academic literature and the “real world” of practice. Fourth, arguably, the fastest way to change the way business-to-business marketing evolves is to start by explicitly stating what are the desirable outcomes, and then critically evaluating the current performance-appraisal schemes which are currently used to shape the behavior of both students and faculty.

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