MANAGING THE REVIEW PROCESS AT THE *JOURNAL OF MARKETING*

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The *Journal of Marketing* develops and disseminates knowledge about real-world marketing questions relevant to scholars, educators, managers, policy makers, consumers, and other societal stakeholders around the world. This document outlines a set of recommendations for managing the review process to help us achieve this editorial mission. We begin by describing three important qualities of articles published in *JM*. This is followed by a discussion of what we think constitutes a successful review process and how we approach the management of empirical rigor at *JM*.

Key Qualities of Articles Published in *JM*

JM articles have three important qualities. First, *JM* papers must offer *new knowledge*, meaning the paper offers important ideas and/or findings beyond what is available in the literature. Papers published in *JM* can offer conceptual and/or empirical contributions to knowledge.

Second, *JM* papers should focus on *real-world marketing topics and problems* that have relevance to firms, consumers, policy makers, and/or societal stakeholders engaged in or influenced by the practice of marketing. This substantive focus is *JM*'s raison d'être and it ensures that theories are grounded important marketing problems, that models are in the service of marketing questions, and that the research offers implications for the real-world.

Third, the ideas and findings must have an acceptable level of *validity*, meaning a reasonable approximation of the truth. For theory, papers must display sufficient conceptual rigor, meaning that authors are precise and logical in the development of their ideas, including construct definitions, predictions, and frameworks. Empirical papers should not be wrong (meaning there is no fatal flaw), measures must reflect constructs, analyses must be performed correctly, and earnest attempts should to be made to investigate alternative explanations using design, models, and/or theory. We encourage honest and full reporting and accept that this may mean that there is some variation in the levels of statistical support for results across alternative operationalizations, samples, and modelling approaches.

Features of a Successful Review Process at *JM*

A strong review process evinces eight important qualities. We describe each and explain the steps we expect Editors, Associate Editors, and reviewers to take to help us create these qualities at *JM*.

Fairness. The first quality is a high degree of *fairness*. This implies several critical corollaries. First, a paper should be judged on its own merits, not against any theory or method filter that is a personal preference of the editorial team. Contributions come in many forms and the review process should respect those differences. To ensure this is the case, we have selected AEs and ERB members who can cover a wide variety of approaches and who are open-minded and theory- and method-agnostic.

Second, the editorial team assigned to handle a paper should have reasonable knowledge and skills in the area of contribution claimed by the authors. When this occurs, judgments are based on an educated analysis of the paper. When this does not occur, comments and recommendations are likely to be too general and not driven by the paper or research area. We have taken the following actions to ensure our review teams have the requisite expertise. To begin, we ask our AEs for input on reviewer selections. These recommendations are considered advisory and considered alongside the Editor's own choices. In addition, we have updated the topic and method codes used to match papers and reviewers and developed additional tools to facilitate this process.

Third, there should be no conflicts of interests in the review process. At the *Journal of Marketing*, reviewers are not be assigned papers where they have a preexisting conflict of interest of the any of the following types:

- You are presently or have previously coauthored a paper with any of the authors.
- Any of the authors was or is your thesis advisor.
- Any of the authors is a business partner or relative.
- Any of the authors was or is at the same institution at the same time as you—either as a student or faculty.
- Any of the authors was or is one of your PhD students or you served on any of the authors' dissertation committee(s).

If a conflict emerges in the review process, the reviewer should alert the Editor in charge of the paper to this situation. Reviewers may inadvertently be exposed to the identity of the authors through a variety of means. This information does not pose a conflict of interest per se and reviewers can remain in place as an objective judge in the process. Regardless, in the interest of full disclosure, it is helpful for reviewers to share this information in the private comments to the Editor. Likewise, if a reviewer has served as a reviewer on the paper at a different journal, we ask them to alert the Editor to this fact. This allows the Editor to make a decision about how to proceed with full information.

Consistency. The second quality of an effective review process is *consistency*. We emphasize two aspects. First, the criteria used to judge papers in the review process should be applied consistently. We use several strategies to ensure this is the case. All editorial team members are given the same criteria used to make editorial judgments. At the *Journal of Marketing*, these criteria are to emphasize:

- How interesting and important the ideas are for the field of marketing;
- Empirical rigor should be used in the service of the marketing question, not as an end in and of itself;
- That the paper exhibits conceptual rigor, meaning that constructs are defined and strong arguments are offered for the theoretical propositions/hypotheses; there should be a level of coherence across the conceptual ideas; and
- The relevance of the ideas and findings for marketing stakeholders.

We also emphasize two qualities of the reviewing mind-set. First, we want reviewers to adopt a constructive approach that not only identifies issues but also suggests reasonable corrective actions. Second, we think it is in the field's best interest if reviewers are willing to take risks in encouraging the revision of promising, but currently flawed papers. Each of these points is now discussed in detail.

Constructive. The third quality of an effective review process is that it should have a *constructive tone*. This means that editorial team members should be willing to offer recommendations to solve some of the criticisms they raise. If, for example, a theory is lacking, what literature or concepts would be useful? If a model is missing a critical element, what is required to rule out competing explanations? This type of feedback not only improves author perceptions of the journal, it also asks the review team to engage deeply in the paper. It is easy to offer a set of standard criticisms about papers, such as lack of conceptual framework, endogeneity threats, or lack of managerial or theoretical contributions. However, offering suggestions regarding how these issues may be resolved improves the quality of published papers and builds *JM*'s reputation even when papers are rejected. We have appointed AEs and ERB members we believe are willing to adopt this developmental approach. We ask the AEs to systematically rate reviewers on how thorough and constructive they are and share aggregated scores on these factors as well as timeliness recorded within the *JM* system with reviewers on an annual basis. We rate AEs on the same criteria and share performance on an annual basis.

Risk-taking. The fourth quality of an effective review process is that it should involve a measure of *risk taking* in order to publish the highest-impact work. This might involve taking risks on new ideas, new authors, and new types of evidence. Our field needs to take more risk to bring the best ideas to market. We have selected AEs and ERB members who are willing to take measured risks on papers that can be developed into contributions.

Not a vote-counting exercise. A fifth quality of an effective review process is that it should *not be a vote-counting exercise*. The disposition of a paper should be based on the comments and questions raised, not necessarily the final recommendations made by the reviewers. If, for example, a reviewer rejects a paper, but does not offer critiques that are commensurate with this recommendation, it important for the AE and Editor to account for this disconnect when making his/her decisions.

Responsible. The sixth quality of an effective review process is that it should be *responsible*. A responsible review process means three things. First, reviewers, AEs, and Editors should respect the author's objective and not try to hijack the paper—meaning the review team takes too much control from the authors. We believe this is generally done with the goal of helping the authors improve their contribution. However, we must all be careful that we do not take our recommendations beyond a reasonable level. To ensure ownership stays with authors, we require a "Statement of Intended Contribution" for all submissions as currently used at *JCR*. This statement, which is a maximum of 300 words, outlines the state of scholarship prior to the paper and what the paper adds. This is not a restatement of the abstract, which is more general and meant to attract readers. Instead, this statement is written for experts who understand the area.

Second, reviewers, AEs, and Editors should not just make criticisms—they should also explain how their criticisms would influence the pattern of ideas or results in the paper. We address this issue in detail below in the section on "Managing Rigor at the *Journal of Marketing*," but summarize it here because it is important. Too often reviewers raise questions about a paper they consider fatal. However, absent from the review is an explanation of how the critique explains the pattern of results. We ask review team members to offer such an explanation (see Lynch 1998; Lehmann, McAlister, and Staelin 2011).

Third, a responsible review process means that reviewers, AEs and Editors should not share papers in the review process or their reviews with any outside parties. This ensures that ideas are protected when papers are submitted to *JM*.

Timely. A seventh quality of an effective review process is that it is *timely*, meaning that authors are given feedback on their manuscripts within a reasonable length of time. To that end, reviewers are asked to return their reviews within three weeks of receiving the review invitation and AEs are asked to return their reports within two weeks.

Roadmap. A final quality of an effective review process is a clear set of directions or *roadmap* for authors. This is primarily the job of the AE who, as the area expert, integrates the reviews into a set of directions for improving the paper. We encourage AEs to help authors by prioritizing reviewer suggestions, including determining whether reviewer requests will improve the paper or whether the requests are peripheral to the paper's contribution. Further, when reviewers offer contradictory advice, the AE should offer directions on what path should be followed.

Format. In terms of length, two single-spaced pages is generally sufficient for a review. It is very helpful to the Editor, AE, and authors if reviewers number their comments. Importantly, do <u>not</u> write comments in the order in which they come up in the paper, or in no particular order. Instead, consider the following review categories that we have found helpful:

- A short <u>synopsis</u> of the paper and its findings
- Evaluate the <u>contribution</u>: Suggestions to improve contribution(if needed)
- Identify major <u>conceptual</u> strengths, weaknesses, recommendations
- Identify major <u>empirical</u> strengths, weaknesses, recommendations
- Evaluate <u>readability</u>
- Minor comments and suggestions

Finally, we ask reviewers to not reveal their overall recommendation (e.g., “reject” or “major and risky revision”) in the review; instead we ask them to share it with the AE/Editor along with private comments about the manuscript.

Managing Rigor at the *Journal of Marketing*

The importance of rigor in marketing scholarship. Rigor imposes requirements on conceptual and methodological activities in scholarship to ensure results are logical, valid, and reliable. Without such requirements, our research could easily devolve into opinion and become riddled with error. Rigor brings credibility, which allows marketing scholars to play an influential role in classrooms, in firm decisions, and in critical policy and societal debates. Further, given our findings can guide decisions made by these stakeholders, we bear the responsibility to ensure that our ideas and findings are, to the best of our knowledge, true.

Concerns about the increasingly prominent role of method rigor. At the same time, there are ongoing concerns that methodological rigor has acquired a too prominent role in marketing scholarship. This concern, expressed by many colleagues and authors, is captured well by Lehmann, McAlister, and Staelin (2011, p. 155), who note, “… recently there has been a noticeably increased emphasis on the use of (often unnecessarily) complex analyses and an accompanying decrease in emphasis on the importance of the topics explored and the substantive insights that come from explorations.” There are similar discussions among members of the INFORMS *Marketing Science* community. In response, *Marketing Science* recently announced a new section “Frontiers in Marketing Science” that would bring some papers through a faster review process.

As comments from different parts of the community indicate, this increasingly prominent role for method rigor appears to exact important costs. First, many important projects are abandoned. Second, many projects that do survive this first gate fail to progress in the review process because method issues are emphasized more than insight and contribution. Third, more and more attention is given to method issues in our journals.[1]

How empirical rigor is managed at JM. These concerns are important and shared among many in the field. They have even more significant implications for *JM* because an overly strict method focus may challenge its substantive position. At the same time, *JM*, like all journals, must ensure that the papers it publishes are valid. We approach the management of this important issue with the following actions and ask our AEs and reviewers to do the same.

First, we focus on empirical methods as a means to achieve valid and reliable substantive insights. Insight means that the paper offers important ideas that have the potential to change the thinking or behaviors of *JM* constituencies. Empirical rigor should be a means to developing insights, not an end in itself.

Second, we emphasize that a paper uses appropriate methods to answer the proposed research question. Lehmann et al. (2011) found that authors believe that their methods were not viewed fairly, but that they were being judged against a general method standard that had little connection to their work. This likely means that reviewers did not read the paper very carefully or followed a set of prescriptions without considering how they apply to the paper's research question.

Third, we emphasize both conceptual *and* empirical rigor. Conceptual rigor means that authors have carefully defined their constructs and developed a set of logical connections between them in their theory. Furthermore, authors should offer a compelling conceptual logic

[1] To determine if this is true at *JM*, we counted the number of pages in the "Method" and "Results" sections in the January and April issues in 1997 and the January and March issues of 2017. Appendices at the back of articles focused on method issues were counted, but web appendices were not. Conceptual or theory articles and commentaries were removed from the sample. The March issue replaced the April issue when *JM* went to six issues per year. Results indicate that an average of 55.7% (SD = 8.8%) of pages published in *JM* in 2016 were devoted to method and results compared to 42.7% (SD = 8.8%) in 1997.

for their predictions—meaning they explain the reasons for the expected effects. All of these errors of conceptual logic create fundamental problems in papers that need an equal amount of attention.

Fourth, we stress that method issues should be considered relative to conceptual and substantive contributions. If a paper is breaking new ground or offering new ideas to an established area, method questions, unless fatal, should be less important. We do believe this happens now in the review process—reviewers and AEs cut authors some slack on method issues if the paper is very novel. We encourage this stance. We agree with Raju's (2011, p. 18) restatement of Lodish that, "Approximate answers to important problems or issues are just as useful (if not more useful) than precise answers to wrong, ill-defined, narrow problems." Likewise, we subscribe to the values outlined by former *JM* editor Lusch (1998, p. 1), who wrote, "… my preference will be for relevance and importance, even if it is at the cost of some weakness in research method. We much prefer to publish an article that says something about an important topic, despite some weaknesses in research method, than to publish an exquisitely executed research study that is not on an important topic or issue. Ideally, we will publish manuscripts that are both important and strong in research method."

Fifth, we emphasize a criterion that others described, as "It is not wrong" (Lehmann et al. 2011; McAlister 2005; Staelin 1995)—meaning there is no fatal methodological flaw. To ensure this occurs, we ask all members of the editorial team to describe how their criticisms would explain the pattern of results achieved. Lynch (1998) refers to the inability to distinguish a fatal flaw from a correctable flaw as the "fundamental reviewer error" and suggests this occurs when the "error comes when the critique cannot explain the pattern of the data found" (p. 3). We agree with Lynch that, "Confounds that don't explain the data should not change our confidence in research conclusions." We ask review teams to follow the advice of Lynch "… to follow your criticisms one step further than is typical. Work through how fixing the ‘problem’ you have identified would change the data pattern. If it would not, or if the data pattern would grow only stronger, you have not identified a fatal flaw.” Lehmann et al. (2011, p. 161) offer a similar strategy when they note:

> Thus, reviewers would be asked to comment on the paper’s methodology in terms of whether the paper was wrong and, if so, how a different (and presumably a correct) methodology would yield a different result. Thus, for example, it would not be enough to say that a researcher had omitted a factor in the analysis; it would be incumbent on the reviewer to indicate how this omitted variable would be expected to interact with the variables of interest and alter the general findings.

Sixth, we do not insist or expect statistical results can (or should) be 100% robust all the time across replications, alternative models, estimation approaches, measures, or subsamples. Statistically, this is very unlikely to be the case even when the hypothesized relationships are true. In line with a balanced scientific approach, we encourage honest and complete reporting, even if this means some variability in the level of support for some of the conclusions across alternative samples, operationalizations, and modeling approaches. We believe this approach will help eliminate selective reporting and p-hacking. This is the only way to grow our body of marketing knowledge responsibly.

This responsible reviewing approach reduces errors and ensures we treat authors fairly. As AEs, we have had to perform this role many times at *JM*, *JMR*, *JCR* and *Marketing Science*. A critique is offered by a reviewer without careful consideration of how it affects the validity of the findings. By working through the effect, we have found that it is often the case that the concern is not fatal or may not work against the author’s findings. If so, we have noted this in our AE reports and asked the authors *not* to make the recommended changes to the paper. We would ask our AEs to adopt this practice as well.

Finally, we stress, as noted by former *JM* editor Kohli (2011, p. 1), that “The perfect paper does not exist.” Similarly, former *JMR* editor Gil Churchill used to say, “There are no perfect papers—only published and unpublished papers.” We must work to create the best papers possible while also acknowledging that all papers have limitations.

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