How papers get better before they get published

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I have been asked to contribute my recollections about the editorial review process for the article, “Evolving to a New Dominant Logic for Marketing” by Stephen L. (Steve) Vargo and Robert F. (Bob) Lusch, which was published in the Journal of Marketing (JM) in 2004. This chapter offers my recollections – with the advantage of hindsight.

Initial submission

A new editor is frequently met by a deluge of papers – some of which have met with rejection at other journals. As incoming editor at JM, I received a number of manuscripts that had been rejected by the previous editor, David W. (Cave) Stewart. Some of these manuscripts appeared to have been resubmitted without many changes. Perhaps the authors were hoping that a new editor would have a fresh perspective on their paper. Unfortunately, after reading the paper and the editorial correspondence, I usually reached the same conclusion that Dave Stewart had. There didn’t seem to be a path forward for the manuscript.

Among these, the paper now entitled “Evolving to a New Dominant Logic for Marketing” (hereafter called the “SDL paper”) stood out for several reasons. First, the cover letter from Steve Vargo and Bob Lusch candidly described the paper’s history and asked me to consider their (new) version of the paper for review and potential publication. Second, JM’s paper files – containing previous versions of the manuscript, associated reviews and editorial correspondence – were about six inches thick! The authors had made substantial changes during each revision. Third, the paper was a conceptual paper with a strategic focus. These papers are often the most difficult to develop and publish – although they sometimes win awards when they are successful. They also require a committed review team who can truly add value through their comments. Last, after reading the files, I realized that the paper had evolved considerably. Clearly, many people had felt the paper had potential – but could it be realized?

Today, editors at some journals often make “reject, resubmit” decisions, so that it is not unusual to reconsider a previously rejected paper. However, in 2003, this practice was rare at marketing journals. There is a good reason for not reconsidering rejected papers. If a paper has not met the hurdle for publication after three rounds of review, it is usually better for the authors to submit the paper to a new journal. A new journal, with a new editor and reviewers, might be able to help move the paper forward in ways that the existing review team could not. Conversely, there were only a few outlets for conceptual and strategic papers in marketing other than JM at that
time. It seemed unlikely that there was a journal better suited to finding a path to publication for this paper. The American Marketing Association gives its journal editors complete discretion over the editorial review process, so I could put the paper into the review process if I wished. I felt that I needed the fresh reviews to evaluate whether to take this paper forward, so I decided to send it out for review.

Selecting the reviewers
Steve and Bob had demonstrated that they were willing to devote considerable time and effort to improving the paper. If the paper was to continue to move forward, it was crucially important to have reviewers who could help make the paper better. For this reason, I used two reviewers who had seen the paper in the past and one new reviewer. My approach to selecting reviewers is to choose experts with complementary perspectives, to achieve both breadth and depth. For this paper, I was able to obtain three outstanding reviewers: Valarie Zeithaml, Roland T. Rust and George Day. Subsequently, all three were recipients of the AMA–Irwin–McGraw-Hill Distinguished Marketing Educator Award.

Valarie is a strong conceptual thinker, who speaks and writes extremely well. She has authored many award-winning articles. Roland is a scholar of great breadth, who has a strong focus on service topics, and has been recognized for his contributions in diverse areas. George is an expert on marketing and strategy, who has written many highly influential articles, and has extensive experience in both marketing academia and practice. Not every paper has three such notable scholars as reviewers! I knew them well and believed that they could provide the insights necessary to increase the contribution of the paper.

JM’s manuscript flow was increasing, but the journal had a fixed page limit. Since conceptual articles tend to be somewhat longer than other articles, it was very important that the contribution of the article be commensurate with its length. Fortunately, during my tenure as editor, JM did not have an area editor structure, so I worked directly with the reviewers and authors to improve the paper. As with other papers, I sometimes spoke with the reviewers or authors on the telephone rather than writing – which helped the review process focus on critical issues and converge more quickly.

Reviewer contributions
With the passing of the years, I can’t remember the details of a complex review process that incorporated multiple revisions. However, a few critical changes to the manuscript stand out in my mind. First, the authors had a deep understanding of the historical development of the field of marketing. It was important to cover this ground succinctly, so Table 1 (“Schools of Thought”) and Figure 1 (“Evolving to a New Dominant Logic”) were introduced into the article. These were helpful ways of summarizing the evolution of marketing thought, so that the reader encountered the new ideas offered by the manuscript earlier in the article. This change increased its focus on key conceptual arguments and its contribution to marketing science and practice.

Second, Valarie Zeithaml helped create a strong conceptual structure for the article. She suggested that the key ideas in the article be formally stated – leading to
the creation of its “foundational premises.” This feature crystallized the article’s key ideas so that its arguments could be strengthened – and debated. Not only did it make it easier for readers to follow the authors’ reasoning, it made it possible for scholars to build upon their work (for example, Ballantyne and Varey 2008). Third, a crucial insight was offered by George Day, who suggested the term “Dominant Logic.” His terminology concisely encapsulated the authors’ ideas about the evolution of marketing thought. It also overcame a significant impediment to publication. Specifically, previous reviewers had felt uncomfortable with language implying that the article was articulating a “new theory of marketing” or a “paradigm shift.” Today, the term “Service Dominant Logic” and its acronym SDL are widely used – indicating the importance of this insight.

Last, but not least, every article benefits from a reviewer who advocates for the paper. Roland Rust was an advocate for the SDL paper – and his role was especially important due to its unique nature. Since the 1960s, an extensive literature had developed on service management and service science topics. (See Fisk, Brown, and Bitner’s (1993) review article for a description of early research on this topic.) The SDL paper was simultaneously arguing for a new approach, and vindicating the conceptual work of its scholarly forerunners. Roland’s in-depth knowledge of the service literature gave him an appreciation of the novelty and nuance of the SDL approach, yet he was sufficiently open-minded to embrace an evolution in marketing thought.

Collaboration and impact
Naturally, for any paper to be accepted for publication, it must be factually correct and well-reasoned. Moreover, it often makes sense to acknowledge counter-arguments within a paper. For example, in a paper that develops theory-based hypotheses, it is sometimes useful to offer one or more alternate hypotheses that (perhaps) rely on a different theory. However, Don Lehmann once told me that – to be accepted for publication – a paper doesn’t have to be exactly right; it just has to be “not wrong.” His view was that the issues explored in an article can always be debated and extended in subsequent articles (if they warrant it). This perspective was very important to the conclusion of the review processes for the SDL paper.

The reviewers and I recognized that the SDL paper could be controversial. We had helped the authors refine and clarify their ideas, but there were countervailing theoretical arguments, ideas and opinions. To what extent should these opposing ideas be explicitly recognized in the paper? After a few review cycles, there was a general sense that incorporating counter-arguments within the paper would have eroded the fabric of the paper, extended its length and lessened its impact.

In talking over the penultimate revision of the SDL paper, George Day suggested to me the paper could be published with a set of commentaries. I liked the idea immediately! In this way, JM could accommodate a variety of reactions to the paper, stimulate discussion and debate and advance the science and practice of marketing. It was important to present diverse perspectives – so I gave considerable thought to how best to achieve these goals. I decided on many short commentaries rather than inviting a single (longer) commentary. In a sense, this approach is quintessential embodiment of the SDL logic! After consulting Steve, Bob and the three reviewers,
I invited commentaries from George Day, John Deighton and Das Narayandas, Evert Gummesson, Shelby D. Hunt, C.K. Pralahad, Roland T. Rust, and Steven M. Shugan. By bundling the paper with several commentaries, synergies were created that increased the contribution of the SDL paper.

**Guidance for beginning scholars**

What are some of the lessons to be learnt from the evolution of the SDL paper? Naturally, authors should be persistent – but persistence is not enough. One critical success factor is that authors must accept guidance from the review team and continuously work to improve their ideas. My first letter to Steve and Bob was five pages long – excluding the reviews – and they were very responsive. In addition to responding to reviewers’ comments, they sought out opportunities to present their work in different forums and acted upon the feedback they received. In my experience, authors are often reluctant to embrace change and typically make only small changes to their papers.

Second, authors must clarify and refine the presentation of their ideas. Writing clarity is essential in all published work – and especially conceptual work. Reviewers and readers will have expertise in diverse disciplinary areas. Hence, authors should use every tool at their disposal – verbal, mathematical, and pictorial – to communicate clearly. For the SDL paper, it was essential that Steve and Bob drew from multiple disciplinary perspectives and defined key terms very precisely. Moreover, the crystallization of their ideas as foundational premises helped readers grasp their key insights. Authors should consider the best way to convey each essential point.

Third, the “right” review team is important. The capabilities and resources of the editor and reviewers must match the requirements of the paper. The SDL paper was unusual in that it went through many rounds of review over a long period of time – thereby benefiting from the advice of multiple reviewers and editors. Of course, no author wants to spend ten years or more bringing a paper to publication! However, it is not uncommon for a paper to be rejected by a review team at one journal and – after major revisions – be submitted to another journal where a new review team develops it further so that it is suitable for publication. Both authors and reviewers must understand the collaborative nature of the review process.

Last, the publication process offers both risks and rewards. Beginning authors are often advised to “follow their passion” without any warnings about where their passion might lead them. However, I would add two caveats to this advice. First, authors should recognize that their work must match the positioning of the target journal. In the case of the SDL paper, there was a good match with the *Journal of Marketing* because it is committed to publishing articles that address substantive marketing questions. In contrast, a paper on a narrow, highly specialized topic might not be suitable for the *Journal of Marketing*. Second, developing a paper over a protracted period of time is a risky strategy. Scholarly developments may overtake the paper, reducing its contribution. In addition, beginning scholars usually need a body of published work to meet the requirements for promotion and tenure. Hence, a useful rule of thumb for managing these two risk factors is to “work on the paper that is closest to publication.” This rule might mean putting a particular paper on the back burner to focus on moving another paper toward publication.
Closing thoughts
Don Lehmann once told me that an editor is remembered by the best papers he or she publishes – not the worst. I am happy to be remembered as the editor who published the SDL paper!

Note
1. The *Journal of Marketing* converted to an online review process in 2003. The article had been revised many times over a period of six or more years.

References