

# 2017 ACR Presidential Address

## Consumer Research Contribution: Love It or Leave It

Margaret C. Campbell, University of Colorado, Boulder, USA

I am honored to be here today. Thank you to the members of the Association for Consumer Research for your confidence. And my special thanks to the ACR Board for their service and help.

Over my 26 years of coming to the ACR conferences, I have always enjoyed the opportunity to hear the presidential addresses. These addresses have been informative, interesting, and inspiring. Now that I am here, I find that these earlier addresses are also intimidating. Informative, interesting, inspiring and intimidating; as a marketing professor, I call these the 4 I's of presidential addresses. My intimidation only increased as I looked over the past presidents and realized how much admiration I have for so many of the people on that list. I very much appreciate the ideas, knowledge and direction that they have provided our field and the opportunity to follow their lead.

The process of developing a presidential address is challenging. You are faced with identifying something that you and at least some other ACR members are likely to think is interesting and informative, and that is without even *hoping* that you may be able to be inspiring. Initially, I spent some time worrying about whether there was anything for me that fit this bill. However, I fairly quickly realized that there is. The contribution of consumer research, both in terms of the contribution of individual papers, and in terms of the contribution of our field, is something that I care very much about and that I think is of general interest to us all. Thus, I would like to use this time to talk to you about contribution.

The title of my talk is "Consumer Research Contribution: Love It or Lose It." I hope that by the end of my talk, and after the development of my nine propositions, you will understand the meaning of this title.

As good academics, let's start with a definition.

Contribution: the thing you believe your paper has, but the reviewers are too (fill in the blank) to see.

OK, so let's look at an actual *dictionary* definition.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines contribution as:

- a. "A gift or payment to a common fund or collection.
- b. The part played...in bringing about a result or helping something to advance."

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, a contribution is:

- a. "Something that you contribute or do to help produce or achieve something together with other people, or to help make something successful."

There are two important aspects of these dictionary definitions. First, these definitions make it clear that a contribution is a piece of something greater. Multiple people contribute pieces to a bigger collection. When one of us produces research that contributes to understanding of consumers, that is a step that moves the field of consumer research forward. Each contribution can be thought of as a gift to the common knowledge fund of the field.

*This leads to my Proposition 1: Contribution requires the addition of knowledge that adds to the current common understanding.*

Second, these definitions emphasize that a contribution must be considered in terms of to what it is contributing. What is the common fund? What is being helped to advance? Just like positioning a

brand, it is necessary to start with a clear understanding of the frame of reference. A contribution is relative to that frame.

We are all here at the conference for the Association for Consumer Research. As such, it is my proposition that the frame of reference for contribution should be consumers. As consumer researchers, we should contribute to the understanding of consumer-relevant issues. Some aspect of being or behaving as a consumer must be central to provide a contribution to consumer research. Consumer research needs to focus on aspects of people, not just as humans, but people *within their roles as consumers responding in relation to some marketplace*.

When I was growing up, my dad used to tell me about an architect who complained that there were clients who wanted to start with a building and then have the architect, "put the architecture on." Sometimes some consumer research seems a bit like this to me. It seems as if the researcher has wanted to research people, but then decides to, "put the consumer on." Perhaps it is because so many of us work in business schools, or have other incentives for publishing work in journals of consumer or marketing research. However, I recommend that if you want to contribute to some other field, such as psychology or sociology, or anthropology you should—that's great; just do it. But if you want to contribute to the field of consumer research, *start* with a consumer-relevant problem. It should not be the case that the focus is on a human problem, and then study 4 uses some consumer or marketplace stimulus to try to, "put the consumer on." The impetus for a true contribution to consumer research is to understand some aspect of consumer response.

*This leads to Proposition 2: A contribution to consumer research focuses on a consumer-relevant issue.*

Several years ago, the editors of the *Journal for Consumer Research* (JCR), Mary Frances Luce, Ann McGill, and Laura Peracchio, asked that a contribution statement be included in submissions to the journal. I think that their very good idea was to use this as a nudge to get us all to start thinking about our contribution earlier, and certainly before we submit to JCR. Starting with a contribution statement before writing the paper could be a real boost to the clarity of the work. Given the importance of JCR to our discipline, let's take a look at what JCR provides to guide the contribution statement. The JCR site states that, "Your contribution statement should be focused on the following: 1) the state of scholarship prior to your research; 2) what your research adds."

This is a lovely, concise encapsulation of how to think about contribution. First, what do we already know? Second, what can I add to improve that common knowledge? In other words, what can my research help us understand that advances existing consumer knowledge?

### THE IMPORTANCE OF AUDIENCE

This leads to another important issue in terms of contribution. To whom are we speaking? Whom do we wish to help advance? When considering contribution, we need to consider the audience for our contribution. That is, we need to identify the intended beneficiary of the common fund to which we wish to add. Understanding the audience is necessary prior to asking what can be added to improve that common fund.

## 2 / Consumer Research Contribution: Love It or Leave It

The Association for Consumer Research has a logo with three characters. As many of you know, and as Jeff Inman pointed out in his presidential address, the characters in the logo were created to represent Academia, Industry, and Government. While you, like I, may wonder why there is no character representing Consumers, and why it looks like a family decision-making unit, one way to interpret this logo is that academic research can inform the academic literature, government policy and industry actions in the service of consumer well-being. Thus, while the primary audience for academic consumer research is academic consumer researchers, good research that provides insight to a consumer-relevant problem is likely to be able to be used to improve governmental and/or business decisions.

As academic researchers, we can contribute to consumer welfare by providing evidence-based knowledge that enables industry to provide products and services with value propositions that help consumers to achieve their goals at prices they can afford (a central objective of marketing). Likewise, our research can increase the ability of governments to develop and enact useful policies that help to regulate markets for the overall good of consumers. Further, we can contribute to consumer well-being by increasing consumers' understanding of themselves and ability to make decisions that help them pursue their goals. The dissemination of this last contribution is most typically through teaching, educational materials, and the media.

*Proposition 3: A consumer research contribution provides knowledge to the academic literature, government, business, and/or consumers.*

So, a contribution to consumer research starts with a consumer-relevant issue and adds to the existing knowledge about that issue. A contribution provides new insight to academia, business, government or consumers. The common fund of current knowledge, however, is contained in the literature that speaks to the consumer-relevant issue. And so, an important question is what then is necessary in terms of specific research to make a contribution to the literature?

### THE UNIMPORTANCE OF SURPRISE

I will start with one thing that I do *not* believe is necessary; it is not necessary for each piece of research to propose a new theory. It seems that in consumer research we have moved somewhat away from the idea of scientific progress through applying, refining, adding to, and building upon *existing* theory. I am not contradicting Kuhn's (1962) important insight that there are periods of turmoil and "paradigm shift" within scientific progress. I am focusing attention on Kuhn's (1962) idea that these periods of turmoil interrupt periods of normal, additive progress and that *both* periods are important to overall scientific progress.

Many consumer researchers today seem to have gotten to a point of thinking that each paper must be brand new, either because of a new theory or because of surprising findings. This can lead to stand-alone findings and proliferation of constructs that do not build onto anything. We can end up producing cute research that does not link to existing literature and does not establish a basis for the type of ongoing research that contributes to our deeper understanding of consumers. To stick with the architecture metaphor, award-winning architect David Chipperfield said, "There is a danger when every building has to look spectacular; to look like it is changing the world." We do not need each piece of research to be spectacular or to change the world. In fact, I propose that striving for every piece of research to be surprising limits the advancement of knowledge.

*This leads to Proposition 4a: A new theory and/or surprising findings are not necessary for a contribution to consumer research.*

Kurt Lewin, the insightful social psychologist who had great impact on social and consumer psychology said, "there is nothing so practical as a good theory" (1943). This is a highly cited quote; he actually seems to have said basically the same thing in at least three different publications and it has been cited hundreds of times (McCain 2015). However, while we cite this, and many of you recognize this and many of you nodded your heads, I would bet that some of those nodding have rejected a paper because it is not "surprising" enough. Now, my central argument is that we need to focus on contribution and I am sure that some of those rejections were appropriate because of a lack of contribution. However, not every contribution needs to be, or even should be, surprising. A good theory is practical because it provides guidance in formulating interesting problems and in understanding productive directions for research. A good theory can help us to advance our understanding of a problem such that we can hypothesize findings that, rather than being surprising, are predicted by the theory. I propose that if, as a field, we are advancing knowledge, many contributions will, in fact, be unsurprising because they are developed from and contribute something to a good theory. Incremental contribution that builds on a good theory is important for the progress of the field.

*Thus, Proposition 4b: Incremental addition to a good theory can provide a contribution to consumer research.*

### THE IMPORTANCE OF CONCEPTUAL UNDERSTANDING

While it is not necessary for a contribution to propose a new theory, it is necessary for a research contribution to advance our conceptual understanding of consumer behavior. A contribution requires conceptual or empirical evidence that supports a nuanced understanding of the process by which a consumer responds within a consumption context.

Does this mean that we always need experiments with mediation analysis? No. As others have pointed out, within an experiment, mediation analysis can be useful to understanding the process, but it is not essential or even appropriate in every case. For example, there are many times when measures of the process are unlikely to be accurate because consumers are unlikely to be able to access the process driving their responses or to be able to respond to a measure in a way that accurately reveals the underlying process.

So in these cases, what *can* we do to provide greater understanding of the process by which a consumer response arises? While not the only way, identifying a conceptually-driven moderator can be extremely useful for this. I sometimes see research, often in a reviewer or editorial role, that seems to have lost sight of the reason that a moderator is useful. An interaction is not proposed for its own sake, just to be able to "show moderation." The research goal is to identify a theoretically-relevant moderator that sheds light on an explanation for an effect.

In her Presidential Address, Alice Tybout (1995) identified a variety of myths and realities of the value of theory in consumer research. Her second myth and reality were:

"Myth 2: It is possible to render a unique explanation for a simple (two-level) main effect.

Reality: Theoretical explanations cannot be tied to any single variable; they are inherently abstract and can only be inferred by employing convergence or triangulation procedures."

Alice Tybout's reality number 2 presents an excellent case for proposing and exploring a moderator. When a researcher examines a theoretically-relevant moderator, a significant interaction provides evidence that the researcher has successfully identified an explanatory aspect of the effect. The interaction between the independent variable and the theoretically-relevant moderator provide evidence of a mechanism underlying the main effect by demonstrating when the effect is more and less likely to occur. Moderators provide value by helping us to better understand the consumer-relevant phenomenon of interest. This offers one way to provide conceptual understanding.

While mediation and moderation primarily apply to experiments, there are many other methods and ways to provide evidence that supports greater understanding of some consumer-relevant response. First, we need to identify an interesting consumer idea. Then we must design and use sound methods. If the methods aren't good, the data aren't good. And we need to develop conceptual understanding of the response. There are many types of data that can provide insight to consumer-relevant issues. In reality, we need to use multiple approaches and multiple types of data in service of better conceptual understanding of consumers.

*However we approach the consumer issue, as stated in Proposition 5: A contribution improves the conceptual understanding of consumers.*

### THE IMPORTANCE OF REPLICATION AND GENERALIZABILITY

I am certainly not the first to make the next point and I will not be the last. A strong contribution to knowledge also requires replication. The often-called "replication crisis" has brought a lot of attention to difficulty other researchers have in replicating previously published results. A few cases of fraud have additionally focused attention on questions of ethics. Because of this, replication is currently often discussed in terms of efforts by independent researchers who attempt to strictly replicate another researcher's work. This type of replication is important to the scientific method. In addition, however, we should not lose sight of the importance of a researcher or research team self-replicating prior to publication. Nor should we lose sight of the importance of conceptual replication, where the stimuli and circumstances are not the same, in strengthening contribution to a real understanding of consumers.

Some researchers repeatedly pretest stimuli and experimental setups until they get to one that "works." They then run a study with this highly pretested setup. It is not clear what the person who reads the paper that contains these without the background of the work that went into "getting it just right" learns. It is not even clear what the researcher, who *knows* all the work that went into it, learns. What, for example, is the construct that took so many iterations by a smart person to successfully manipulate? Do we really have it figured out? What is the purpose of identifying an extremely small set of circumstances that, if perfectly created, give rise to an effect? If the purpose is publication, I suppose this type of method can achieve the purpose. But if the purpose is knowledge creation, it is less clear that the end result of this highly stylized and designed process provides a real contribution.

I see increasing requests by reviewers for "real situations" rather than lab studies. However, it is not lab studies qua lab studies that are the problem. It is not even undergraduates or now, MTurkers, that are the problem (although MTurkers may be a problem). The real problem is asking people, whoever they are, to self-report how they predict that they will behave under a particular set of imagined circumstances. Our own research repeatedly shows, not surprisingly,

that people are not particularly good at self-reporting responses to imagined circumstances. None of *us* knows or is likely to be able to accurately predict how we will behave in imagined circumstances; why do we expect our participants to be able to do this? There are too many conscious, non-conscious and contextual factors that will impact people in ways they do not understand.

One reason that field studies are increasingly desirable is that these examine consumers in real marketplace circumstances, in hotel rooms, or Disneyland, or drug stores. Well-executed field studies enable examination of consumer responses in terms of actual, consequential dependent variables in a "real" environment. There is no consumer guessing or self-prediction of how they will behave; they just behave. While I am a fan of field studies and am impressed by the work that many consumer researchers are taking on, this is not the only way to identify effects that are likely to generalize beyond a particular situation. Well-designed lab studies that move beyond imagined circumstances and self-reports and well-executed field work can provide important, generalizable insight into consumers.

Contribution does not require that every study or paper has to have a "consequential dependent variable" in terms of a "real-world" behavior. Contribution does require that every paper must include research where people are reacting to some consumer-relevant variable, whether in terms of memory, emotions, attitudes, or behavior. And, unless you are trying to understand consumer's lay theories, avoid studies that put consumers in the position of trying to guess their own likely responses.

I will go further out on this limb to propose that a true focus on making a contribution to the fund of knowledge will naturally eliminate a lot of the questionable methods that have been discussed as factors in the replication crisis. We all know that an effect that really makes a contribution can be reproduced; the effect should be open to both exact replication and to conceptual replication. An effect that can only be observed under one, exact set of circumstances is not much of an effect and does not contribute much to our understanding of consumers. Thus, a strong focus on making a contribution leads to self-replication, conceptual replication, multiple methods, larger sample sizes, varying consumer groups for our samples, more realistic stimuli, and more realistic outcome variables.

*Proposition 6: Contribution requires that a finding is "real" and replicable, ideally with different conditions.*

### THE IMPORTANCE OF AGREEABLE DISAGREEMENT

My next point may be a bit controversial. We are, overall, a pleasant community, and this is a good thing. But I am proposing that we be more disagreeable. Disagreement is vital to the advancement of any scientific discipline. So, while I do not actually advocate that we are disagreeable to each other, I do advocate that we express disagreement with each other's ideas in order to push our science forward.

When I started coming to ACR many years ago, there were people who would raise critical questions in our talks. Frankly, it would scare me a little bit to see certain people in the room because I knew that they would openly question me if they did not see the conceptual clarity or supportive evidence that I suggested. But while it made me scared, it also made me better. Because I knew that they would openly question me if they did not see the conceptual clarity or supportive evidence that I suggested, I was very careful in developing conceptual clarity and in providing supportive evidence.

I am not, however, just talking about, or even primarily talking about, critical questions at conferences. More importantly, our journals need to be open to solid, replicated research that disagrees with

something that was published earlier. Sometimes, we may want to provide disagreeable data. Right now, it often seems that publishing something that questions something published earlier—even if that earlier finding has not been replicated outside of the initial publication—is, if not impossible, highly unlikely. In order to get something that is inconsistent with a prior publication through the review process, the researcher often needs to be able to show exactly *why* the results are in conflict. While that is a desired end goal and it is clearly important for building an area to explain differences and introduce moderator variables, I am not sure why conflicting findings can only be published if, using a moderator, the researcher can both replicate and modify the original findings. What if the original findings were wrong? What if the luck of significance testing was such that the less than 5% chance of finding the effect when it didn't really exist turned up? What if we need additional research attention focused on the original problem because it is more complicated than originally assumed? Couldn't disagreeable data be a starting point?

I wonder if the limited publication potential for disagreeable data, combined with the amazing communication ability offered by the internet pushes us toward non-peer-reviewed, and often disagreeable disagreement. The internet has lead us into uncharted territory. We must evolve new standards and rules of decorum to disagree with findings without attacking our colleagues' research and reputations. We must find ways for productive, peer-reviewed disagreement.

Professional disagreement, or even the potential for such disagreement, encourages us to sharpen our thinking and helps to further what we learn. Challenge pushes progress. One way we build overall contribution and knowledge is by challenging each other's ideas. Successful scientific movement is based on competition of ideas, of theories, and of data until we advance to some new, evidence-based understanding. We need to find ways for polite, professional, and, ultimately, peer-reviewed disagreement.

*Proposition 7: Polite, professional disagreement about ideas and results can lead to contribution.*

### THE IMPORTANCE OF IMPACT

I am, frankly, somewhat worried about our overall contribution as a field of research. I am not the first to raise this issue; I am not even the first to raise this issue in an ACR Presidential Address. That, however, does not decrease my concern. I worry that we don't have enough impact. I worry that economists—and even psychologists—seem to have larger or more seats at the table of public interest than we do. I worry when some of our members, researchers with degrees in marketing, and/or psychology, call themselves “behavioral economists” or “behavioral scientists,” I assume because they believe this will help them to have a seat at the table and a bigger impact than if they call themselves consumer researchers. I worry when I am at a cocktail party and someone asks what I do and then says some version of, “huh, I didn't know that even existed.” I worry that our impact is less than other areas and I wonder if part of the reason for that is a lack of strong focus on the contribution of each of our pieces of research and our overall body of research.

Are we, as individual researchers and as an academy, making the level of societal contribution that we would like? If not, what can we do? Once again, I propose that a concentrated focus on contributing to knowledge about consumers can help us have more impact.

*Proposition 8: Focus on contribution to knowledge about consumers can lead to greater impact.*

At one of my first few ACRs, I had the great pleasure of hearing Morris Holbrook give his ACR Fellow's Address. Morris told a story, as only Morris can, about his father giving eleven-year old

Morris a chemistry set that his father carefully put together piece by piece instead of ordering the neat, matching toy company set that eleven-year old Morris craved. While every piece was superior, it wasn't neat and, most importantly, it didn't come with instructions. After describing some incidents and accidents exploring chemistry without instructions, Morris concluded, “The point, of course, is that—like my father's well-intentioned but somewhat misguided Christmas present—science does not come with an instruction book. Only toy science comes with instructions included. In real science, you must figure out the rules for yourself and you must endure a lot of bad smells, dangerous explosions, crusty messes, broken glass, and bloody fingers.”

At the time I heard this, I was young and idealistic and I thought, “wow, I am in the right place.” Now, I am not young, but perhaps still idealistic, and while I still think this is the right place, I fear that we may have lost sight of the purpose and difficulty of our science. It sometimes seems that for some, the research endeavor has become a game. Researchers often seem to be focused on publication as an end in itself, or a means to a job offer or to tenure, rather than as a way of contributing to knowledge about consumers. Science is messy and difficult and it doesn't come with an instruction booklet. Studies fail, projects have to be tossed out, and progress is always slower than we want. But, if we are sincerely focused on adding to the fund of common knowledge, then we must work hard for that advancement, even when it means throwing out studies and starting over after a research failure.

I think that we are incredibly lucky to get to spend some of our working time thinking about and examining what consumers do and why they do it. But if we want society to continue to support us in this endeavor, we need to make a contribution. I believe that if we approach this work from intrinsic, rather than extrinsic motivation we will naturally address many of these issues. If we do our research, not to have a paper before the job market or for tenure or for fame or for fortune, but because we want to know, and we want others to know about consumers we will use careful methods with sufficient samples to address interesting, real consumer issues. We will build on each other's work and theories and we will make a contribution to consumer research.

*Proposition 9: Research contribution stems from a sincere desire to understand consumers.*

We need to love consumer research for what we can learn about consumers. If we do consumer research because we love learning about consumers, together we will build findings, strong contributions and impact.

I hope I have made some contribution to your thinking about the consumer research endeavor and I thank you for this opportunity.

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