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Bridging classroom and boardroom:
An interview with Professor Robert Kozinets

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ABSTRACT

In this wide-ranging interview with Robert Kozinets, chair of the Department of Marketing at the Schulich School of Business at York University, Jessica Langer examines the role that academics can or do play in affecting the way that marketing is practiced in the business world. The interview discusses the concept of thought leadership among corporate leaders and academics, as well as an emerging dialogue between the two. Kozinets and Langer have a thoughtful discussion of the difference between what marketing is and what marketing does. The interview ends with a discussion of whether academia has to change in order to foster the innovation needed to move marketing forward.

Professor Robert Kozinets is the Chair of the Department of Marketing at the Schulich School of Business at Toronto's York University and is one of the foundational voices in the field of consumer culture theory. After making a name for himself with his work on Star Trek fandom and consumer culture, he went on to found the practice of "netnography," an ethnographic research method widely used to study online communities.

Rob is also keenly interested in the ways in which marketing theory and practice relate to each other, as well as how academics and practitioners can forge better and more fruitful connections.[1]

I caught up with Rob over lunch at the Spoke Club in Toronto to discuss some of the issues that arise when theory and practice collide – and when they don't collide as much as they should.

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Q: What role do, or can, academics play in affecting the way that marketing is practiced in the business world?

A: It is an interesting opening question. At one end of the spectrum, a handful of marketing academics are trying to push the boundaries in terms of thought leadership and reminding companies about the changes afoot in the wider world and how these affect and interrelate with their own ever-changing goals. I think that, in general, business people are not paid to reflect – they're paid to do things. They are doers. On the other hand, business academics are paid to think and reflect, but don't often have a chance to do things. That makes the two a match made in heaven: specialization applied. When it works, as it often does with startups, mixing academic know-how and business action orientation is very powerful.

Q: Is there a role for business leaders in reflection, and vice versa?

A: Thought leadership is very important to consider here. There is a role for academics in advising practice, and a role for business leaders in advising thought leadership, but I do not think academics should be running businesses, or that business leaders don't have the intellectual training to be able to think and reflect in the same intellectual capacity as academics.

Our society values action over reflection and careful thought, but I'm not sure that's the right order of things. Our world shows that we have this ready-shoot-aim mentality. Business leaders lead *practice*, but they don't necessarily lead the world of intellectual thought.

So back to the original question: thought leadership is only as good as the thoughts that go in.

Our belief in the presence and value of silos needs to be revised in light of the changes that are happening in technology. Rapid empowerment of the consumer – rapid changes in production with 3D printing, the Internet of things, to produce consumers that are productive. When I'm using my printer, am I being a consumer or producer? I don't need the print shop anymore. I'm producing and consuming at the same time. The thinkers at the university need to be on top of these changes – and the businesspeople are closer to the changes, but they need perspective to put these changes together. This is a feedback loop that needs to happen.

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1. In the spirit of full disclosure, I note that Rob is a colleague of mine at York University, where I teach social media marketing in his department.

Intellectuals in business schools influence practice in four "hot zones:" through writing books, through teaching students, giving keynotes and consulting. Those are the areas of interface where there can be a two-way exchange – not just academics telling businesspeople what to do, but businesspeople telling academics what's happening and what the biggest changes are that are happening right now. The more we can get that interface happening in these four "hot zones", the better the symbiotic relationship will be. But it is a symbiotic relationship.

In those hot zones, we have areas of opportunity, because institutionally, we're not aligned with those areas. In B-schools I've taught in, books are not rewarded… but writing a bestselling business book is how thought leadership happens in the business community. Some schools don't value consulting – some curriculum is *decades* old. This is a huge misalignment. And in terms of giving keynotes, most academics don't give speeches to industry. Some may do executive teaching, but they're not out there learning, asking questions and shaping their material. We should, as institutions, think of making this something that's rewarded, or at least recorded. But we don't do that.

In terms of bridging the divide between theory and practice, everything is lined up *against* that, rather than for it.

Q: We've both attended the ACR (Association for Consumer Research) conference for the past two years. One thing I've noticed about the conference is the extent to which there is nearly no involvement in the conference, either on the presentation side or the simple attendance side, from folks in industry. The conference was an information bonanza for those of us who make our living advising clients on marketing strategy, and it seems like such a missed opportunity for industry to gain understanding of some of the cutting-edge work being done in the field. What's up with this lack of outreach to industry?

A: They try to do outreach, but there's very little. MSI (Marketing Science Institute), which I'm also involved with, does do that, but they're one of the few. They are big and perform a big, valuable function – MSI brings together leaders in the marketing industry world with leading professors in academia in a range of formal events. So it's got some of the top companies and we all get together and talk together about particular issues. It's really a valuable organization.

Q: Do you think there's a significant disconnect between marketing theory as it's explicated in academic journals and marketing as it's practiced?

A: There is an increasing blurring of boundaries between what marketing *is* and what marketing *does*. Financial management, internal/external communications and PR have overlapped greatly and have infringed greatly on what marketing used to be. Even supply chain management used to be retailing and thus marketing, and now has moved to operations. All these dissolving silos and yet the traditional education structure is still based around those silos. We still haven't figured out how to change that, but at Schulich we've started experimenting with these things – I'm starting one next year in global retail management. There are sub-disciplines that you need to know in order to do the job well in a digital age.

Academic institutions are slow to keep up with global technological change. Hard for them to keep up with the massive changes in how marketing is done – we haven't even begun to touch big data in terms of teaching. We've been pretty good at Schulich at building these courses out – but you can't let your curriculum get stale. You have be responsive to what's important for practitioners, and be proactive about where you want to lead things. We've started a qualitative class taught by Russ Belk – we're trying to lead the marketplace, not just follow it, but sometimes it's tough even to follow it!

Q: Are structural changes necessary within the academy in order to foster innovation?

A: Despite all its controversies, the tenure system is critical to fostering a spirit of innovation in b-schools. I think it's really poorly utilized and very few people actually take the opportunity to be a risky thinker post-tenure. I'd love to see us refocus on the ability to take not only a free-thinking basic science approach to what's going on in business but also a critical-cultural one where we can deconstruct what's going well and what's going poorly in not only the world of marketing but in consumer culture and society itself.

Q: How, if at all, can we mitigate the risk and emphasize the reward for early-career researchers and/or academia-linked entrepreneurs who choose to embark on innovative projects (which may not always be politically or academically popular)?

A: It comes down to the institutional and organizational structures out there. We are just beginning to be aware of the hybrid possibilities between academic intellectuals and business strategists and thought leaders. There's considerable overlap between these functions, and some cutting edge companies are sponsoring, for example, quasi-academic positions of outreach people who go to conferences, publish in journals, do collaborative research and apply it to problems. Microsoft does this. Sam Ford has a position like this with Pepperdine; Ivan Asquith has one. A bunch of Henry Jenkins grads from MIT have these kinds of positions.

Businesses are institutionalizing these positions, where people can get paid to draw on academic research, and part of their jobs is to make it useful again. They're *code switchers* and ambassadors, too.

Now, on the academic side, we have a number of people who are blogging and tweeting and doing podcasts and doing various forms of meet-up groups and outreach and trying to get research out in a way that is useful and palatable to businesspeople and to the general public. So an example of this would be Mary-Anne Twist at the JCR, who has been, over the last few years, very successful at releasing press releases and sending them to the major media to cover articles in the journal. It's resulted in a huge boost in press, in readership and in transmission of finding. This kind of code switching and ambassadorial roles on the academic side are also emerging and slowly being recognized as highly relevant to what we do. We need more people who are willing to act as ambassadors between industry, academia and the media, and their various constituent groups. There's a strong need in this area for both technological and literary skills. You can't write like an academic and expect to reach a general audience; you can't write like a journalist and expect to reach academics. It favours people who have good "translation" skills.

This is an opportunity for people who are good at interfacing. We need to create a mutually supportive, symbiotic and co-constitutive structure. (Now I do sound like a professor!)

Q: Thanks so much for your time, Rob.