

Navigating the Retailing Frontier through Academic and Practitioner Collaboration

Dinesh Gauri*, Dhruv Grewal

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Abstract

Retailing academics and practitioners must develop close, collaborative relationships, which might involve various, meaningful efforts to assist the other side of the collaboration while also furthering their own respective objectives. Only through such collaborations can retailing ensure sufficient research rigor and relevance to advance the field and expand its reach to nonacademic audiences. To achieve some innovative insights on why and how academics and practitioners can work together, a thought leadership conference was organized at the Walton College of Business (University of Arkansas), and one of its key outcomes is this special issue. All the entries in this special issue were crafted by teams of academics and practitioners, working together to describe new frontiers in retailing. They worked collaboratively for more than a year on topical, timely, relevant topics for today's technology-based era. The meaningful results should provide inspiration for more collaborations, pursued by both sides, with the support of university administrators and corporate executive leadership. Without the support of both, bridging the gap between research and practice is not possible.

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The importance of close, collaborative relationships between academics and practitioners across marketing and retailing has gained prominence especially in the current new technology and big data era. New technologies harnessed by retailers and shoppers have generated vast amounts of data at various touch-points (e.g., point-of-sale systems, store displays, social media posts, search advertisements). These data and technologies provide unprecedented (or substantial or tremendous) opportunities to gain insights and recommend/adopt strategies to enhance customer value through better product offerings and customer service. To achieve this goal, academics and practitioners must pool their resources – ideas, thoughts, plans, and data, as indicated in the next section. The Sam Walton College of Business at the University of Arkansas was pleased to host such a collaborative Academics and Practitioner Thought Leaders Conference on the Future of Retailing in October 2019. The details of the conference are given in the second section. The conference led to eight teams each comprising of academic and practitioner experts on specific retailing topics. These experts compiled their thoughts on the future of retailing and worked for over a year

to produce the articles in this Special Issue, which are briefly discussed in the third section.

Collaborations of Academics and Practitioners in Retailing

Technology is largely driving the current revolution in retailing, changing nearly every aspect of the retail value chain (how retailers and manufactures source products and raw materials; how retailers and manufacturers supply products to customers). Considering these broad and rapid changes in the marketplace, it is important for academics and practitioners in the retail value chain to interact to ensure rigor and relevance in the output of their research efforts that can lead to theoretical and managerial implications for advancing retail practice. Academics can develop theories and methodologies, collect data, build, and analyze empirical and analytical models to understand and investigate the problem in depth and with rigor. Practitioners help by identifying the relevant retailing problems, being focused on finding workable solutions, using the data, visualization, and analysis tools they have at their disposal. Thus, collaborations can help academics and practitioners to achieve their respective objectives. Fig. 1 offers a framework for such collaboration. Such collaborations can be achieved in numerous ways, some of which are listed below:

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: dgauri@walton.uark.edu (D. Gauri).

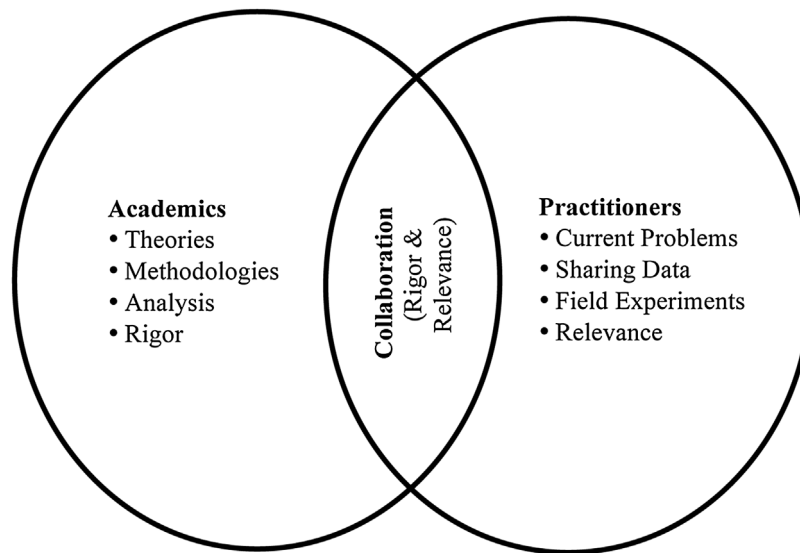


Fig. 1. Framework for academics – practitioner collaboration.

- 1 Organize joint academic – practitioner conferences.
- 2 Fund chaired/endowment positions targeted at promoting practical research.
- 3 Share marketing data with academics.
- 4 Jointly conduct field experiments and test marketing theories in real-world settings.
- 5 Ask practitioners to review manuscripts submitted to marketing journals and provide commentaries on published articles.
- 6 Encourage papers authored by teams of academics and practitioners.
- 7 Develop communication channels between the two entities and identify meaningful ways for implementing academic research in the real world.

We are fortunate to be working in a field where practitioners have long engaged with and provided much needed support to researchers, in various forms. For example, retailers have established research centers at various universities (e.g., University of Arkansas, Babson College, Southern Methodist University, Texas A&M University, University of Florida, University of Chicago, University of Pennsylvania, Santa Clara University, University of Washington, University of Houston, and University of Wisconsin, Arizona State University and others), funded multiple chaired and endowed position at many universities, and shared data about shopper purchases (e.g., IRI and Nielsen generously shares their data to support academic projects). In turn, leading research universities offer tools of great value to industry actors, such as the consumer sentiment index created by the University of Michigan, a widely used indicator of consumer confidence. Organizations such as the American Marketing Association (AMA) and Marketing Science Institute (MSI) act as a bridge between academics and practitioners, providing many opportunities for interaction through webinars, research grants, and sponsored projects.

Thought Leadership Conference at the University of Arkansas

As a top journal in the retailing area, and the oldest academic journal in marketing, *Journal of Retailing* has a long tradition of organizing academics-practitioner collaborative conferences focused on specific themes. The 2004 Retail Ruminations Conference at University of Arkansas was focused on the Big Middle in Retailing (Levy et al. 2005) and the 2008 conference at Babson College focused on customer experiences (Grewal et al. 2021). In keeping with this trend, a conference was organized in October 2019 focused on the future of retailing.

The conference was titled “What’s Next for Retail—Research Opportunities and Challenges: Academic & Practitioner Perspectives.” It was hosted by the Walton College of Business, with support from Dean Matthew Waller, and the Center of Retail Excellence (CRE) at University of Arkansas, and co-sponsored by Retail Supply Chain Institute at Babson College, Southern Methodist University, and AMA Retailing and Pricing SIG. The conference was divided into eight fora each comprising of academic and practitioner experts. These teams first heard presentations in a plenary session and then brain-stormed ideas and issues to produce the articles in this special issue.

The plenary session featured senior executives including Cecilia Wu (Walmart, VP, Customer Science), Andres Meija (Coca-Cola, VP, Shopper Marketing), Erin Campbell (Saatchi & Saatchi X, Sr. VP, Strategy & Digital), and Raju Balan (Mu Sigma, Account Manager). Each presenter outlined relevant focus areas and highlighted key trends confronting their respective organizations. For example, describing key demographic shifts in the U.S. population, Wu noted not just multicultural trends but also how saving time has become as important as saving money to households trying to simplify their lives while juggling work and home responsibilities. Walmart also has realized that customers rely on technology to save time, such that many of them (37% of millennials, 23% of U.S. adults older

than 18 years) ask for more technology tools and apps to help manage their lives. Wu touched on Walmart's efforts, aided by various data science techniques, to enable customers to live better while saving money. In a further discussion of demographic changes and technology, Meija cited predictions that Hispanics will constitute about 28% of the U.S. population by 2060 and touched on how technology is radically changing how companies operate and how customers shop. He described Coca-Cola's efforts to ensure all packaging is completely recyclable by 2025, as well as integrate at least 50% recycled material in all its new packaging by 2030. Meija also cautioned that even as we acknowledge changing demographics, sustainability challenges, shifting geopolitical structures, and pervasive technology influences, for the present and future of retail, the consumer is still in charge. Both Campbell and Balan highlighted the importance of the customer in suggesting that brick-and-mortar stores, as the original "social network," can provide quantifiable, valuable impressions that are just as effective as television or digital media when it comes to reach and efficiency. They provided an example of using store traffic to measure impressions of various in-store advertising and displays, which helped them identify four key tenets to describe high-impact retail experiences: sensorial, dynamic, immersive, and interactive. These executives provided food for thought on what the future holds for retailing.

After the plenary talks, to set the stage for thematic dialog, brief keynote presentations by practice leaders covered each of the eight themes: technology (John Hennessy, Elateral), artificial intelligence (Rida Moustafa, Walmart), format (Jonathan Navarro, Walmart), private labels (Suzanne Jervis, Sam's Club), customer relationship management (Tom Duncan, P&G), merchandising (John Karsberg, H&M), promotions (Renee Brandon, Field Agent), and sustainability (Emi Cardarelli, Unilever). These speakers were chosen expressly for their ability to represent the latest practitioner thoughts; several of them also joined with the academic teams to craft the papers contained herein. These practitioners contributing to each group deliberations represented a host of retailers (e.g., Walmart, Sam's Club, H&M, Dillard's), manufacturers (e.g., P&G, Unilever, JM Smucker, Reckitt Benckiser, Coca-Cola, JB Hunt, Warner Brothers), and support firms (e.g., IRI, Field Agent, WhyteSpdr, Geometry Global, Nielsen, Shiloh Technologies, Elateral, RichContext, The Sustainability Consortium).

The lively, fruitful exchanges at the conference, especially within each group and its academic and practitioner members, sowed the seeds for articles in this special issue. The end goal for these collaborative efforts was to generate research frameworks and ideas around each of the eight themes, so the articles are ripe with ideas and insights, as we demonstrate in introducing them. We also appreciate the helpful and constructive feedback provided by the special issue reviewers, listed in Appendix A.

Special Issue Articles by Academic and Practitioner Groups

The heart of this special issue begins with an introductory article, crafted through a collaboration of the special issue editors with the regular *JR* editors (Grewal et al., 2021), that is cen-

tered around technology as a hub in the wheel of retailing, on which the 6Ps (retail place and supply chain management, product, pricing, promotion, personnel, and presentation) of retailing are the spokes. Next, Shankar et al. (2021) propose a detailed framework of the antecedents and outcomes of advances in retail technology. Considering that retailers have been steadily adding in-store technologies, such as augmented reality (e.g., Sephora, Kate Spade, IKEA), interactive mirrors (H&M's flagship New York City store), smart mirrors (Rebecca Minkoff), and service robots (Lowe's), understanding the role of technology is of central importance to survive and thrive in the retail marketplace. In more detail, Guha et al. (2021) seek to establish the role of artificial intelligence (AI) in retailing and identify factors that enhance its adoption. They discuss a host of interesting retail AI applications, both customer-facing (e.g., Pepper robots interact with customers and answer questions) and those used in back-end applications (e.g., managing supply chains).

Turning the focus on retail customers, Gauri et al. (2021) pose an argument for retailers to embrace a customer-centric view by laying out two potential paths to ensure retail formats are competitive and relevant. The first involves enhancing the customer experience; the second works to reduce customer frictions. Retailers even can follow both paths, if they have enough resources, and these authors provide several examples (Amazon, Lululemon, Kidpik, Apple, Nike, Sephora, Walmart, Target, Warby Parker, Grit Grocery) that have succeeded in both enhancing the customer experience and reducing friction across search, purchase, acquisition, and return tasks. In an article that also considers various stages of the customer experience, Vadakepatt et al. (2021) stress the importance of a sustainable supply chain and highlight the need for supply chain members (including retailers) to reuse, reduce, and recycle. They provide other specific examples, such as IKEA, Walmart, North Face, H&M, Coca-Cola, Unilever, REI, Loop, and Starbucks, to show how retailers can weave sustainability initiatives into the very fabric of their operations to achieve long-term, sustained growth and improve their triple bottom lines (profits, planet, and people).

Success also might result from effective private-label strategies, especially considering how perceptions of these offerings have steadily improved. Gielens et al. (2021) juxtapose two broad private-label strategies: a single, overarching brand versus a range of brands. They also offer a history of the evolution of private-label strategies, which have moved beyond an exclusive focus on economy and value to integrate premium options. Overall, they call for "smart private-label" strategies that take advantage of advances in data analytics capabilities and build in attributes other than price or quality. Continuing the discussion of effective retail strategies, Roggeveen et al. (2021) propose a framework of five merchandising strategies, which should be structured to align with customers' identities. As they describe, technology and social media can amplify the retail identity, resulting in congruence and desirable customer outcomes (e.g., engagement, loyalty, willingness to pay).

In addition to merchandising, Villanova et al. (2021) emphasize the need to tailor retail messages, according to the stages in the customer's journey. The right message at the right time in the right place can produce all the right metrics. They also acknowl-

edge challenges and opportunities for all three broad phases of the customer journey: consider and evaluate, buy, and loyalty. Finally, Krafft et al. (2021) offer insights into how consumer data disclosure considerations can inform customer relationship management, highlighting the need for retailers to understand fully customers' expectations about the data they share. They showcase the importance of leveraging customer data without violating implicit expectations.

Conclusion

As the contributions in this special issue exemplify, close collaborations between academics and practitioners can be meaningful, insightful, and impactful, offering benefits for both parties. We express our deep appreciation to all the conference participants, who interacted over the course of more than a year to ensure the high quality of these published articles. We sincerely hope that further collaboration opportunities continue to be explored by both sides and, with the support of university administrators, executive leaders, and the broader community. Furthermore, we anticipate that these thought-provoking articles that will spur further research on these critical topics, thus continuing to advance and challenge the new frontiers of retailing.

Appendix A. List of reviewers

The special issue editors express their gratitude and acknowledge the constructive and timely feedback provided by the following individuals:

Ruth Bolton, Arizona State University; Ed Fox, Southern Methodist University; Haresh Gurnani, Wake Forest University; Henrik Hagtvedt, Boston University; Colleen Harmeling, Florida State University; Vamsi Kanuri, University of Notre Dame; Praveen Kopalle, Dartmouth College; Manfred Krafft, University of Münster; Yu Ma, McGill University; Vanessa Patrick, University of Houston; Andrew Petersen, Pennsylvania State University; Nancy Pucinelli, University of Bath; Venky Shankar, Texas A&M University; Hari Sridhar, Texas A&M University; Martin Wetzel, Maastricht University; Gautham Vadakepatt, George Mason University.

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