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Michael Baker, Visionary: A Personal View

Michael Baker, who died in August 2021, may justifiably be described as the premier UK marketing academic of his generation, and his loss creates a huge gap in the academic marketing field both within the UK and internationally. I first encountered Michael via the third edition of his book “Marketing: An Introductory Text”, the first edition of which was published in 1971. Although I had completed my first degree in Business Studies, marketing was not taught on business programmes in the late 1960s and early 70s to anywhere near the same extent as nowadays, and on graduation I was largely ignorant of the subject. In those days, most of the post-graduate programmes available to business studies graduates (who were very much a novelty at the time) were in humanities, statistics, or economics. I chose to do postgraduate studies in economics. I taught economics and business studies for a few years consequent to taking a doctorate, and one day without notice I was told I had to teach a two-semester module on marketing theory and practice! I did not want to do it, but I was lecturing part-time and I needed the money. A week or so before I began teaching the module my head of department took me aside and said “All you need do is read Michael Baker’s marketing book, base all your lectures and classes on it, and you will be OK”. I did and I was, and I have been vicariously grateful to Michael ever since. His introductory chapter on the marketing concept as the proposition that the supply of goods and services should be a function of the demand for them (quite a revolutionary idea at the time, when production, manufacturing and technological matters dominated management thinking) provides the most succinct and informative treatment of the issue that I have ever seen, then or now. The book covered all aspects of marketing clearly and comprehensively, concluding with prescient comments on the future of consumerism and the opportunities for marketers that the consumer movement would provide. I followed the book diligently when teaching, and though I say it myself, the module I delivered was sound.

My next encounter with Michael occurred more than a decade later when I had worked in import/export for several years and had begun to take marketing seriously following the completion of the European Single Market in 1992. I had re-entered academia, had begun to do research in the subject and submitted a paper to the Journal of Marketing Management, a publication that Michael founded and which he edited from the time of its inception. Since then, I have published several papers in the JMM, in the Journal of Customer Behaviour, and in other journals within Michael’s stable. On each occasion I found Michael’s editorial support, advice, patience and good humour to be invaluable, especially when I was new to publishing in the academic marketing field and thus inexperienced vis-a-vis its norms, procedures and folkways. I recall Michael’s willingness to take the side of an author in response to damagingly negative comments by referees, even to the point of his

being prepared to intervene and to reject a referee's recommendation if Michael felt this was warranted. Alas, not all journal editors will take the time or trouble to engage with the refereeing process in contentious cases to the same degree as Michael; preferring instead simply and naively to accept a referee's opinions. Michael would correspond with the various parties to a disputed paper and seek justifications for each side's position.

In fact, Michael's support of others extended to several fields within the marketing profession. Of particular note were his activities for the Chartered Institute of Marketing (where he vigorously championed the Institute's qualifications) and his willingness to assist (entirely pro bono) in events at universities, polytechnics, and colleges of further education at all levels of status in the academic marketing hierarchy. In my personal experience, this was highly unusual among many professors of marketing of Michael's generation, who often preferred to mix only with fellow academics within their own university status group. For many years Michael was a leading figure in the Academy of Marketing's annual doctoral colloquium and, until the end, made valuable contributions to the Academy's general activities.

As I progressed as a full-time marketing reader and then professor, I began to organise events at my then home university that were designed, under the auspices of the Academy of Marketing, to facilitate the development of recently qualified marketing academics. I remember gratefully how Michael freely gave of his time to speak at the doctoral and post-doctoral early career researcher colloquia that I arranged. I recall vividly the advice given by Michael at one of these events to recently PhD-qualified, yet largely unpublished, early career marketers in universities. Begin, he stated, by writing a draft of a research paper based on your doctorate and show it to your colleagues at your own institution. Heed their comments and then prepare a working paper for presentation at a conference. Obtain as much feedback as you can at the conference – both during your presentation and afterwards - and convert your working paper into a competitive paper, again for presentation at a conference. Submit your competitive paper to an appropriate conference, and note carefully the referee's comments on your work. Present your competitive paper at the conference and again try to obtain as much feedback as possible. Revise the paper, discuss it again with colleagues and submit it to a journal closest to the subject matter of the paper's contents. Thus, Michael continued, gradually build up your expertise and experience of drafting academic manuscripts and if (say) your work involves food marketing, send your paper to a food marketing journal. If the paper is about bank marketing, submit to a financial services marketing journal. Do not send a piece of work to any of the "top" marketing journals unless you are totally sure that the paper fits exactly with the aims, culture, style and expectations of the journal – you can do this when you have gained a deeper understanding of the process of academic publishing, when you "know

the ropes”, and when you are familiar with the norms and actors within academic publishing networks. Be realistic about the suitability of your work for a specific journal and when submitting to *any* journal (i) examine carefully the structural layouts and typical research methodologies of papers appearing in past volumes of the journal, (ii) as far as possible make your own submission congruent with these layouts and methodologies, and (iii) try to relate your work to topics and debates discussed within the pages of the journal in question. Over time you will amass a body of work that will form the basis for submissions of papers to many journals, including those normally considered to lie at the top end of the spectrum.

I agree wholeheartedly with this advice, which differs from that sometimes given to junior staff that they should “aim high”, send their early work to the highest-ranking journals, and then “trickle down” to submissions to lower status journals. Far too often, I have witnessed the destructive consequences for the careers of recently qualified early career researchers that arise when heads of department demand that freshly appointed and unpublished junior lecturers submit their first papers to four-star (and often entirely inappropriate) journals where the likelihood of acceptance is negligible. Rejection, followed by unsuccessful resubmissions to other equally unsuitable journals, might be repeated a number of times, leading to junior staff becoming thoroughly dispirited and demotivated by the process, and sometimes to end up publishing nothing. Consequently, they do badly in subsequent performance appraisals. On two separate occasions I have personally observed deans of faculty thumbing through the Association of Business Schools’ journal quality list and counting the number of ABS stars associated with each appraisee’s outputs. Praise or derogation ensued, yet no consideration was ever given to the inherent quality of the papers involved, to their contributions to theory or practice, or to the (in my opinion questionable) accuracy and relevance of the ABS ranking methodology. The appraisees’ work was not even read by the people doing the appraisals; nor was any advice sought regarding the calibre of the appraisees’ work.

Equally problematic, in my own view, is the possible influence of journal quality lists on departmental insistence that individual researchers angle their work towards outputs likely to do well in the UK Research Excellence Framework (formerly the Research Assessment Exercise), which determines financial allocations for research to UK universities. Because of the huge pressure on university business schools to succeed in the REF (for reasons of departmental status, even survival, as well as financial considerations), academic staff are strongly encouraged, sometimes required, by those in charge of REF submissions to seek always to publish their work in journals perceived by REF submission managers to have the greatest likelihoods of favourable reception by REF assessment panels. A result of this is that during the years preceding a REF exercise many heads of department

become obsessed with the journal quality lists which they predict (rightly or wrongly) the REF Business and Management panel will take into account when awarding grades. However, the ranking of a particular journal may change over the years.

Perniciously in my opinion, a downgrading of a journal within an influential journal quality list can have damaging consequences for the authors who publish in that journal, given that heads of department might discount completely all work appearing in that specific outlet. This can create much anxiety among researchers who previously were happy to offer their best work to a journal that now does not carry the number of stars demanded by managers of REF submissions. Personally, I find the many of the rankings allocated to certain journals by the main journal quality lists to be bizarre, and in some cases totally unjustified. To this day, I have been unable to fathom the rationale behind some changes in rankings. A number of journals allocated relatively low grades in journal quality lists have in fact been trailblazers in their respective fields. Equally, very poor work is sometimes published in high-ranking journals. Moreover, newly established journals do not normally appear in journal quality lists or, if they do, they are given the lowest rank irrespective of the quality of the papers within their pages. Thereafter, because various journal quality lists substantially reproduce each other, low rankings are transferred from one list to another. It is a pity, in my opinion, that journal quality lists were ever allowed to attain the oppressive influence they currently possess.

Michael's reach into the academic marketing community was extensive. Among other things, he founded and headed at the University of Strathclyde one of the first ever and finest academic departments dedicated entirely to marketing. There he nurtured numerous PhD students, at least 16 of whom went on to occupy chairs in marketing at other institutions. Michael helped set up the Marketing Education Group, an organisation established to promote the teaching of marketing in universities and other colleges and to stimulate research in the subject. MEG later became the Academy of Marketing – today the dominant UK academic marketing association. In addition to founding the Journal of Marketing Management, Michael established the Journal of Customer Behaviour and the journal "Social Business", both of which represented radical newcomers to their fields while upholding rigorous academic standards.

It is interesting to speculate about what Michael might have done were he to have overseen *all* UK higher education. I personally suspect that one of his first acts would be to abolish (or at least drastically revise) the UK Research Excellence Framework. I have experience of preparing submissions for the REF and I share the view of many academic colleagues that, as well as being an expensive bureaucratic nightmare the REF system, and its predecessor the RAE, have in reality

provided little evidence of having improved either the quality or quantity of UK business research. Michael was no friend of the gameplaying associated with these four-yearly research assessment exercises, or the “transfer market” of professors among universities that arose, or the competitive and adversarial cultures within universities that followed. I agree wholeheartedly, moreover, with critics who allege that assessments of this nature can encourage conservative and narrow-minded approaches to the selection of research topics and methodologies, and substantially stifle research creativity. A welcome bonus resulting from the abolition of the REF and/or similar assessment systems would be that the infatuation with journal quality lists exhibited by many heads of department would wither, given that the heavy influence of these lists has itself mainly been a reaction to REF/RAE exercises.

I know from conversations with Michael that he favoured fairer national research funding systems that do not penalise newer institutions and which recognise the value of books, of articles based on systematic literature reviews, and of publications in practitioner orientated outlets. Michael championed collegiality within departments and research cultures devoid of the conflicts and antagonisms sometimes nurtured by competitive desires to do well in terms of journal quality lists. Research should be assessed based on its inherent value, he insisted, not crudely by looking at the journal in which it was published. Early career researchers, Michael argued, need to be developed gradually and evaluated holistically; not merely by their success in publishing in outlets highly rated in a particular journal quality list. Such approaches are, I believe, worthy of emulation in other universities. As regards Michael’s own contributions, his numerous books on marketing, market research and marketing strategy remain influential to this day, and his journal articles and editorial activities helped shape the direction of academic marketing research both within the UK and internationally. Long may Michael’s legacy continue.

NOTE

The views expressed in this opinion piece are entirely those of the author and do not imply any position on the matters discussed on the parts of either the journal or the publisher.

Dr Roger Bennett is currently a professor of marketing at Kingston University London. Roger is the author of many books and a large number of journal articles on various aspects of marketing and business management. In 2012 he received the lifetime achievement award of the UK Academy of Marketing and in 2015 the International Marketing Trends Association’s award for outstanding international achievement in the field of marketing.