
The positive power of the reviewing process

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With the new *IJMR* Peer Reviewer of the Year Award just announced, the Editor asked if I could share some thoughts on the reviewing process. So here they are ...

THE REVIEWER'S ROLE

We often talk of ourselves as the market research 'community'; this is an important term, for as a body we exist as an informal international grouping of peers and not as a formally structured organisation or hierarchy. Our members range from the highly experienced and well-rounded director or professor to the young, novice researcher embarking on a PhD or a first agency job. But we all share a fundamental common goal: to advance knowledge. We progress our endeavour in supportive fashion, building on what has gone before by – in the words of Isaac Newton – 'standing on the shoulders of giants'. If we did not undertake, voluntarily, to review each other's work, our cooperative mission would, quite simply, fail. Without this willing activity, new ideas, data and techniques would have to be assessed by some elected, paid set of individuals. The range of reviewers would necessarily be limited, the culture of the process radically altered and, in my view, the system impoverished. Double-blind peer review allows ideas to be advanced, challenged, refuted and refined in the absence of the conscious or unconscious prejudices that could creep in if the reviewer were to know the author's status, while at the same time allowing a certain freedom of commentary not possible if the reviewer's identity were known to the author.

Double-blind peer review is a fine process. Those in our community who refuse the role of reviewer because they are too busy with their research (which they will expect to be reviewed) might like to ponder on the very fundamental place the review process occupies in the market research community. And the vast majority who do review, rather than viewing it as an unrewarded burden, might like to bask in a warm glow of personal satisfaction in the contribution they are making.

THE REVIEW PROCEDURE

Trying to explain how you carry out a review is a bit like trying to tell someone how you ride a bicycle. You just do it! However, having spent some time reflecting, I realise that I do adhere to a set of procedures. I have two golden rules that apply to every review: always return the review on time and always say something positive about the paper. Timeliness is a courtesy both to the author and to the journal. None of us, as authors who have sent off our intellectual offspring to be assessed, likes to wait too long to know whether our hours of toil are to be rewarded or rebuffed. The reviewer has a duty not to prolong the agony, and this includes letting the editor know if you can't complete the review on time, so that it can immediately be sent to another reviewer. Part of a journal's reputation is built on the speed of turnaround, and this is likely to remain the case as national research assessment exercises with tight deadlines remain on the academic landscape and as new ideas continue to fight for dominance in the practitioner world. As reviewers are 'employed' by the journal, we have a duty to maintain that journal's reputation.

Saying something positive not only represents humane and decent behaviour towards fellow members of our community but is also likely to lead to increased overall output. How many stories have we all heard about researchers who have been so badly affected by scathing reviews that they haven't dared submit another paper for months? *IJMR* has two types of paper, forum and formal, which have slightly different review criteria. It is therefore important for reviewers to ensure that formal papers are assessed in terms of their contribution to the overall state of knowledge in an area, while forum papers are judged on the value of a new idea or practice in a specific context.

Beyond the general rules of being timely and positive I follow other procedures. I always set myself an uninterrupted period to devote to reading the paper both in-depth and in its entirety – a paper shouldn't be reviewed in snatches. I find train or plane journeys pretty ideal settings for reviewing. Having settled down comfortably with the paper, I start with a long hard look at the **abstract**. Are two things crystal clear: the paper's purpose and the paper's contribution to the field? If so, then I eagerly await the unfolding of the story in the following pages. If not, I worry. If the abstract is muddled then the paper probably is too. As I read through the script I look for a number of specific things in each section. **Background**: has a convincing and substantiated case been made for the importance of the issue under investigation? A paper may be a master of logic and reasoning but may not really matter. **Literature review** (in the case of a formal paper): has the author succeeded in synthesising the relevant literature in an insightful manner? Too often writers use this section simply to signal that they have read around the area rather than to interpret or explicate a set of ideas. **Research objectives**: are these clear, and are there too many? This is probably the area where most papers fall down – too many objectives cloud the overall purpose of the study. **Methodology**: is it fit for purpose? There can be a sledgehammer-to-nut tendency where fancy quantitative models are used to no obvious advantage. On the other hand, qualitative methodologies can often be simply descriptive with no theoretical justification for techniques used. And there are still too many pieces of research based on a sample of undergraduate students – who rarely represent the population under investigation. The *IJMR* has clear guidelines on research samples, which can be found in the *IJMR* Guidelines for Contributors at the back of each edition (and in more detail at www.ijmr.com). Incidentally, authors should have a good look at the full guidelines to ensure they know what constitutes a 'best practice' submission to the journal, as this is specifically covered within them. **Findings**: are these clear and distilled? Often it isn't clear exactly what the study has proved or disproved. **Discussion**: is it clear how this piece of research has added to knowledge in the field, and is it clear how this research can be applied in practice? Good papers leave us in no doubt that the market research community is richer for this piece of research.

Having posed these questions to myself during the reading I then set out my comments under the general headings of strengths (always starting here) and weaknesses. Publishing is part of any researcher's ongoing development, so I always try to provide some food for future thought. Many papers will be returned to the authors for more work. Where this is the case I make suggestions on a page-by-page (sometimes paragraph-by-paragraph or line-by-line) basis. If the paper is to be rejected, I try to find the little diamond nuggets that can be salvaged from the paper, and honed and polished for future submissions. If the paper is utterly brilliant I try to say exactly why it worked so well so that the author can write another one!

I hope this has been of interest; I think I will leave the explanation of bicycle riding for another day ...

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