

Response to “A Taxonomy and Assessment ...” by Dick McCullough

By Greg Allenby

Dick McCullough makes some great points. I, like him, have been a regular ART Forum attendee for 20 years, and have also attended a number of Sawtooth Conferences. We both come away from these conferences with new ideas, our careers have benefited from the people we've met, and we've gained much from the opportunities given to us to present our work. We count many people who attend the ART Forum as our friends, and we look forward to seeing them each year. The ART Forum is my favorite conference.

I think what Dick senses can be chalked up to the natural course of events. Each of us is trained with a set of skills that are popular at the time we went to school, and, as time goes by, new techniques, perspectives, data and problems come onto the scene. Every seven or eight years (the time needed to get tenure) brings with it a new generation of thinking and problems. I, along with many others, helped to popularize Bayesian methods in marketing in the 1990's, and the field of marketing is now on to new methods and new problems. Things that are popular now are social networks and structural economic models, and these problems are not necessarily tackled with the help of Reverend Bayes. As the latest shift occurred, I noticed myself grouching that those youngsters just weren't working on interesting problems – i.e., I mean, who would actually use that stuff? I was beginning to sound like Dick.

Each year, the AMA Research Council appoints a chairperson to oversee the ART Forum conference. And, each year, the chair assembles a committee of academics and practitioners to develop the conference program. The chair is always looking to add new people to the committee to welcome and include the new generation of thinkers and doers, and the charge is given to assemble a program that reflects three things – rigor, relevance and emerging topics.

Academics love rigor. Developing variables and models that are good for understanding consumer behaviors is what drives us. We want to think deeply about how variables come together to prompt purchase, how decision options influence choices, and how firms might leverage this knowledge to their advantage. We love to drill deep wells.

Practitioners love relevance. They want to be useful in today's world for many reasons, including the ability to get paid. They have a keen sense for important problems and have the greatest understanding of why academic theories don't work. Because practitioners work at the point of application, they have the most to contribute to the development of new theories. Practitioners are the ones who tell us academics the well is dry and its time to move on, much as Dick is doing in article. This is one of the benefits I get from the ART Forum – I learn what makes practitioners frustrated with us.

Everyone loves emerging topics. We all like to think about new data, new models, new methods of estimation, and new approaches to exploring implications of our analysis. I

know that many of the emerging ideas presented at the ART Forum won't work out, and I gain much from confronting myself with ideas that bring me to new fields of exploration.

Balancing the mix of rigor and relevance in both old and up-and-coming topics is a difficult task for the ART Forum program committee. It is especially difficult when balanced against the need to develop the next generation of academics and practitioner who will be the future leaders of the field. Looking back on my early years with the ART Forum, I remember legendary characters such as Bill Neal, Rich Johnson and Jordan Louviere guiding the content and the discussion at the conference. These individuals had a perspective, wanted to articulate it and were outspoken about what was relevant. They were also very welcoming and encouraging to me, helping me to develop as an academic interested in applied problems.

I agree with Dick that the ART Forum needs to elevate the banner of relevance while continuing to hold onto rigor and emerging topics. This is a difficult task, one that requires a sustained effort over an extended period of time. My suggestion to the AMA is to consider a three-year program committee made up of practitioners and academics with track records reflecting rigor and relevance, plus an appreciation of emerging topics. There needs to be balance among these factors, along with the desire to develop the next generation of leaders. I believe that the movement to a multi-year committee would better allow for the balance needed to satisfy all attendees while ultimately leading to new marketing thought and practice.