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Hail, Hail JRC! Why and How It Must Succeed

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ABSTRACT

This essay acknowledges the visionary efforts of *JRC*'s founder and its dual mission of powerful scholarship and practical relevance for consumers. In going forward, suggestions are offered to elevate the success of the journal within the academic and public realms.

ARTICLE

As the *Journal of Research for Consumers* (JRC) celebrates its 10th birthday, it is an opportune time to reflect upon its past achievements and its forward-going challenges and opportunities. In this brief essay I also offer some recommendations to assist JRC for succeeding during the next several years.

In the Beginning and in the Now

The founding editor of JRC, Simone Pettigrew, was truly visionary in 2000 as she designed and implemented the journal. Up to that point, the Internet and its role in academic consumer research were still terra incognita, as was the potential and the manner of the Internet in disseminating informative consumer research to the public. Simone was the first to grasp the unprecedented opportunity to develop a free, online publication outlet that would publish not only cutting-edge academic consumer research that focused on quality of life, but would also offer those manuscripts in shortened revised forms in which the main findings and implications are communicated in straightforward, non-technical language for the educational benefit of any international consumer who can access JRC (Pettigrew 2001).

The founding of JRC was visionary and timely in other ways besides catching the early waves of the Internet tsunami. Increasing numbers of social researchers, ecologists, philosophers, and business scholars, among others, were recognizing that consumption trends and their negative effects on all living beings and the environment were more worrisome than ever before, and perhaps soon irreversible (see, e.g., Bazerman 2001; Borgmann 2001; Csiksentmihalyi 2000; de Graaf, Wann, and Naylor 2001; Firat 2001; Schwartz 2001; Speth 2003). It was also visionary insofar as JRC offered a much quicker and a much farther-reaching vehicle for researchers to share their latest findings directly with consumers, policy makers, and executives. Although other journals prior to JRC were focusing on consumer and environmental welfare (see, e.g., discussion by Mick, Pettigrew,

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Pechmann, and Ozanne 2012), none had yet developed parallel articles for each published project (one scholarly and one mass audience) and launched them simultaneously into the free e-space of the global Internet.

During its first ten years JRC has produced 18 different Issues, including approximately 100 different scientific projects covering a wide range of topics, from product labelling, elderly consumers, and healthy eating to sustainability, materialism, and consumer addictions. The editorial review board has also expanded. And most recently, the editorial stewardship of JRC has been passed to Ekant Veer, who is an erudite and passionate consumer advocate.

The need for JRC, as it ventures into its second decade, is as urgent and obvious as ever. Worldwide consumption trends are putting increased stress on personal lives, societies, and ecologies (Mick 2006; Mick, Broniarczyk, and Haidt 2004). As I now outline, there are persistent challenges and new opportunities—in both the academic and the public realms—for JRC to reach its highest potential for improving quality of life.

In the Academic Realm

The reputation of any given journal in the realm of academic researchers depends on several coalescing factors. First, it must publish articles that are perceived as rigorous by other academics. Though rigor is a concept open to different interpretations, one definition says that rigorous means “strictly accurate or detailed” (Oxford American Dictionary, p. 584). In the case of research, one can simply say that higher rigor is typically associated with less counter-arguing by smart readers with respect to theory, concepts, methods, analyses, and so forth. That is, the best available logic and procedures are in place. Having said this, however, we must be careful not to be stilted in our views of what constitutes rigor. It varies from one field, one paradigm, or one topic to another. Moreover, sometimes less emphasis on rigor per se can lead to more unexpected or creative insights of greater value.

Secondly, the reputation of a journal is also predicated on a perception among researchers that it is a prestigious place to publish in, which usually means that the given journal has a high rejection rate. Getting published in the journal has to be seen as climbing over a high and difficult hurdle.

Third, the journal has to have a prominent impact score, which is calculated as the average number of citations attained per paper, across all papers published in the journal during the preceding two years. Journals within a specific discipline, like marketing or consumer research, for example, can be ranked according to their impact scores. Higher impact scores suggest that articles in a given journal are being read and used more than articles in other journals. These issues of journal reputation matter a great deal in academia because academics are directly evaluated and rewarded (e.g., salary increases, promotions) according to their publications, especially in top journals.

Fourth, and alternative to point three above, the notion of impact in the context of a journal for consumers must go well beyond numerical impact scores. It is arguably more important to be able to show that the research is truly reaching and affecting consumers. One way would be to include occasional short surveys of JRC readers to determine their beliefs about and uses of specific information after they have accessed articles from JRC. Another way would be track the extent to which JRC articles are cited or summarized in other pro-consumer publications or websites (e.g., www.ethicalconsumer.org).

The *Journal of Research for Consumers* is still a relatively young publication. Achieving its mission to a greater and necessary extent will depend on elevating its reputation in the years ahead. The editor and other people affiliated with JRC should examine journals whose

reputations have risen demonstrably over the last few decades, and determine how JRC can follow some of the most successful strategies. Here are some specific recommendations, based partly on my prior editorial work:

- Invite special submissions (and guarantee publication) from authors whose work in the area of consumption and human/ecological welfare has been highly regarded in the past and, thereby, whose work has tended to be highly cited.
- Develop a special section that publishes brief but innovative ideas/findings that deserve quick and wide-scale exposure. Not all articles in the journal need to involve full-fledged extensive projects.
- Develop more special issues on identifiable topics of high importance, and invite leading researchers to serve as guest editors for these issues; use their professional connections to draw in submissions from other renowned and emerging scholars.
- Initiate a Policy Board to oversee the journal along with the head editor, to help guide JRC to higher planes of reputation and effect.
- Expand the editorial review board further to include more of the most highly regarded scholars and policy makers.
- Develop guidelines for submissions that set out the expected rigor of ideas, procedures, and practical implications for quality of life.

No single suggestion above will automatically raise the reputation of any journal, including JRC. But a concerted plan that focuses on a series of strategies like those suggested above will almost certainly bring JRC closer to achieving its noble mission of being a resource of new thinking and findings that hold substantial import for individuals, families, societies, and the environment.

In the Public Realm

Aside from improving dialogue and learning among academics, JRC has also the twin goal of using scientific knowledge advancements to help consumers and their care givers. JRC needs to press forward with redoubled efforts to accomplish that goal and confirm its achievement. On JRC's website, for instance, the journal could display the number of visits and downloads with respect to the mass-audience versions of the articles it publishes. As mentioned above, the website could also incorporate short, automatic surveys to consumers who visit the site to ask them to rate the JRC articles they have just read and to make recommendations on improving JRC and its website. This effort at continuous and sound improvements via direct consumer feedback is critical.

Further, it would be valuable for the url of JRC's website to be displayed at other pro-consumer websites such as Ethical Consumer (www.ethicalconsumer.org) or Good Guide (www.goodguide.com), among others. In a mutually beneficial arrangement, JRC could similarly put the links from those sites on the JRC site (as it does already with Ethical Consumer). Expanding the inter-links with pro-consumer, pro-environment publications (and organizations) would be very effective in assisting consumers.

To help them further and bring more consumers to the JRC website, it might also be appropriate to inaugurate a new section that includes brief reviews of the latest pro-consumer books. This section could also include summaries of valuable articles from other journals (e.g., *Journal of Consumer Affairs*; *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*; *International Journal of Family and Consumer Sciences*; *Journal of Consumer Education*).

It would be additionally useful for JRC to develop press releases and also work with journalists at prominent newspapers and magazines to determine ways to disseminate the

latest findings reported in JRC. Finally, the dissemination effort should increasingly incorporate social media. Blogging and tweeting by the JRC editor and editorial board, along with statements and links planted on various other social media sites (e.g., Facebook), will also spread awareness of JRC and its value, and bring even larger audiences to the JRC website.

Conclusion

Consumption behaviours across the globe have become the most present and powerful force in determining quality of life for every living being on earth. Anyone who doubts this assertion needs only to look at the trajectory of economic development in China, India, Brazil, and Indonesia, and realize that business growth in such regions is already serving to supercharge consumption trends in the 21st century, with impacts on daily life and the environment that are inevitably manifested in various dimensions of well-being. We need to acknowledge and understand these impacts better, and to shape responses to them, through outstanding and highly accessible consumer research. The *Journal of Research for Consumers* is perched at its 10th anniversary to take flight into greater recognition and influence.

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