

Reflections on the 2020 MMA Marketing Innovator Award

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Receiving the 2020 MMA Marketing Innovator Award is a real honor. My respect for the MMA grew significantly when I had the opportunity to be a part of the MMA Doctoral Teaching Consortium for a few years and I saw first hand the impact it had on the students who participated – plus, I learned something each time from my fellow faculty! But receiving the honor is also personally meaningful as I look at the list of prior winners which includes people I have looked up to my whole career, such as Bill Pride, Mary Jo Bitner, and O.C. Ferrell.

JAME Editor Pallab Paul asked if I would write a short reflection piece based on the talk I gave at the Awards Session at the recent MMA conference. Preparing that talk was enjoyable as I thought back through a career path that resulted in me receiving an award with the term “Innovator” in the title. In my mind, that term has the connotation of someone who has a clearly defined end-goal in mind and works doggedly toward that goal until the right solution is developed. That, I came to realize, did not describe me. Although I’ve certainly made some strategic career decisions and have always worked doggedly, the things I have accomplished have resulted not from a clearly defined end-goal. Instead, if I am honest, they have come from variety seeking and taking advantage of opportunities that arise as a result. In the end, I concluded that I’m more of a “discoverer” than a classic “innovator.”

I am happy to share a few thoughts with you because I believe that many people miss out on opportunities that could help them grow. And they do not do so out of laziness, but because the supposed opportunity did not look like one; it did not appear to be on the direct path toward their end-goal. My career path, both pre- and post-PhD, is anything but a straight line. In fact, my variety seeking makes it look like I’ve spent much time chasing whims. Although it is certainly a risk that a person who chases whims can find their attention so fragmented that they never make serious progress, success as a scholar-teacher requires a pretty diverse set of skills. I admire people who know their end-goal and thus know exactly what skills to pursue with purpose. But for most of us, our passions and end-goals must be discovered, likely even developed.¹

If passion is something that has to emerge, I argue that some critical opportunities that present themselves may not appear to be opportunities at first glance. In hindsight, I can see that from each job, each research

project, each conference, each AMA/MMA/AMS committee, etc., I’ve learned something that turned out to be an important tool in my life toolkit, even if I didn’t see it at the time. One job helped me overcome a fear of public speaking, while another (that I greatly disliked) taught me how to really persist. One research project introduced me to important theories I did not know well, while others taught me how to work with new kinds of data and perform new analyses.

And as important as disparate opportunities have been in helping me build my toolkit, some of them were critical because they allowed me to meet important colleagues. As an example, at a conference in 2001, I went to dinner with friends from my PhD program; these friends also invited a German scholar they had worked with. I ended up sitting by this guy and, in casual conversation, discovered we had a mutual love of movies. At some point, he mentioned that he had figured out that potentially useful research data regarding movies was freely available on the internet to anyone willing to invest the time to gather it. He asked if I would be interested in working together on a project sometime. As an assistant professor pursuing tenure, I was up to my eyeballs in current projects and the last thing I needed was a new project in a new topical area with a new kind of data. But I liked the guy and said “sure,” expecting nothing to come of it. Twenty years later, I have one of my best friends in the world, and Thorsten Hennig-Thurau and I have over a dozen papers and presentations, along with a major book, *Entertainment Science* (Springer 2019). All from being open to possibilities.

Many other opportunities that have shaped my career came along at points in time when it made no sense to take on something new as I was tapped out with current teaching, research, and service obligations, along with a busy family. But working with doc students and assistant professors from other universities, joining the AMA Academic Council, reviewing for a wide range of journals, being asked by other scholars to give feedback on projects, serving on panels and task forces, participating in numerous doctoral consortia (MMA, AMA, AMS, EMAC), working on projects outside my existing interest areas with people I liked, and so forth, expanded my view of the world, helped me develop new skills and interests, and helped me discover my passions.

¹ I encourage you to read Angela Duckworth’s excellent discussion about passion and persistence in her book, *Grit* (2016). It has been very helpful to me.

I attribute a lot of my success to networking – meeting potential colleagues. But equally important is that I have truly poured heart and soul into every project opportunity. I have discovered that one of my passions is helping junior people get their work published. Whether I'm involved as a coauthor or not, I dive in and try to help them. As a result, I continually learn and continually have growing value to offer to my coauthors.

Let me close with three recommendations for how you can discover your own opportunities.

Be proactively on the lookout for opportunities to build your network and your toolkit of skills. Here are a few ways to do this:

- Meet people at conferences. Ask about their work and look for places your interests intersect. Actually follow up with them after the conference.
- Volunteer for roles at conferences (reviewing, chairing sessions/tracks, breakout groups) and in organizations. MMA, AMS, AMA, and other professional associations are heavily dependent on volunteers (and they are almost always looking for more help to spread the workload).
- Read widely. In addition to marketing, read the business press, the popular press, and international press.
- Work with people who are trained differently than you (thus, who think differently than you). You will look at problems differently, but will also learn new theories and new methods. For example, working with a finance professor on a project early in my career altered my skill set and interests in ways that triggered an inflection point in my career.

Do things whole-heartedly and with persistence. In *Grit*, Duckworth (2016) notes that passion comes when you have worked on something long enough to truly appreciate its complexity AND you have developed at least a moderate level of skill in doing it. Thus, if you give up before giving the thing a real chance, it will not become a passion. That is the danger of variety

REFERENCES

- Duckworth, Angela (2016), *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*. New York: Scribner.
- Hennig-Thurau, Thorsten, and Mark B. Houston (2019) *Entertainment Science: Data Analytics and Practical Theory for Movies, Games, Books, and Music*. New York: Springer Nature.

seeking. Surface contact with many opportunities will not provide the kind of value I describe in this commentary. Thus, I believe it is not enough to rack up participation in a long list of opportunities; instead, you must engage deeply enough and long enough with each one to benefit.

- Dive deeply into the literature for a new project – don't just grab data and start running analyses, only to try to backfill a story later.
- Truly learn the theory and the method.
- Never make coauthors wait on you. Deliver what you promise at the time you promise.
- In organizations and on committees, don't just do your job; make the organization better. Choose to make a difference.

Look out for the welfare of others. Maybe there is a karma angle to this, but I believe it is important to help those around you succeed (genuinely, without expectation of payback). Some of this is just to help the world be a better place and to make your workplace a more pleasant place to be. But I also believe that when you invest yourself in the success of others, you expose yourself to new opportunities that would not otherwise exist. Particularly, help doctoral students and junior scholars. Protect their time. Steer them towards useful opportunities. When they ask you for feedback on a project, don't just give surface reactions ... dive deeply into the paper and offer critical constructive feedback. (In several cases in my own career, I've been asked to join a project as a coauthor to help implement the feedback I gave to the original authors.)

In closing, thank you again to Jeanetta Sims and the selection committee for honoring me with the 2020 MMA Innovative Marketer Award and to Pallab Paul for inviting me to write this reflection. I hope this commentary encourages you to seek out a variety of opportunities and to pursue them wholeheartedly. By doing so, over time, you will not only discover the goals about which you are passionate, but you will also have the tools needed to innovate towards them in ways that matter.