

# Editorial: beyond publish or perish: the importance of citations and how to get them

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the importance of citations as a success metric and provide practical tips for increasing citations.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The authors build on previous commentators to provide evidence for citations.

**Findings** – The purpose of academia is not to merely publish. It is to contribute to the body of knowledge. This means shifting focus from publishing as an end goal to publishing as a means to an end.

**Originality/value** – The editorial reminds scholars of their duty to science and the need to take individual responsibility for the spread of knowledge. The generation of citations is not a difficult process as illustrated by the practical tips offered.

**Keywords** Impact, Publishing, Citations

**Paper type** Viewpoint

It almost goes without saying that, for researchers, it is important to publish their findings. As French mathematician and physicist, Francois Arago[1], observed:

Connaître, découvrir, communiquer – telle est, au fond, notre honorable destinée.

To get to know, to discover, to publish – this is the destiny of a scientist.

English scientist, Michael Faraday[2], agreed. In respect of his success as a scientific researcher, he offered the following:

The secret is comprised in three words – Work, Finish, Publish.

Splendid advice! However, publication does not guarantee that others will read the work and should not be regarded as an end in itself. If a publication is not cited by other scholars, it will not contribute to the furtherance of knowledge, and doubt will certainly be cast on its importance, originality and significance. A very high proportion of journal papers receive zero or single figure numbers of citations – a situation that causes concern for both journal editors and authors. So whose role it is to build citations – authors? Editors? Associate Editors? Publishers? (more on this later).

Therefore, it is time to think beyond publish or perish and consider the impact of our work on the scientific body of knowledge.

Distinguished American sociologist, Robert King Merton[3], emphasises the importance of peer recognition of research:

Only when he has published his ideas and findings has the scientist made his contribution, and only when he has thus made it part of the public domain of scholarship can he truly lay claim to it as his own. For his claim resides only in the recognition accorded by peers in the social system of science through reference to his work.

## Which journal to target?

Let's first take an author/researcher perspective on the process. A successful outcome requires the research paper to be published, to be read and to be cited. The pathway to success is laden with obstacles to overcome and requires careful decision-making and planned activities on behalf of the researcher. One of the earliest decisions, and one that is often made prior to carrying out the research, is which journal to target with the research paper. In the absence of the many political agenda surrounding journal publication, a key consideration would be a journal where the material is likely to be read by the largest number of scholars working in the same domain. However, we all recognise that it is not as simple as this. Gruber (2014, p. 166) emphasises the prevailing guiding principles for many researchers seeking a "suitable" journal:

Publishing in highly ranked journals and/or journals with high impact factors and accumulating as many citations as possible are important "means" for academics to improve their own and their institutions reputation and to advance their career ("ends").

However, being considered a highly ranked journal is not a permanent feature. In their wisdom, those responsible for publishing journal rankings regularly upgrade or downgrade journals much to the delight of some, and consternation of others (Tadajewski, 2015). Equally, journal impact factors fluctuate annually. We do not wish to engage in the debate on the pros and cons of journal rankings and impact factors here, but reiterate the point that it is unfair to judge the merits and impact of an *individual* research paper based solely on the ranking and impact of the chosen journal (Gruber, 2014; Li et al., 2014).

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Some journals, and their editors, may have preferences for the types of papers which they deem publishable, and this may not correspond with the thrust of a particular author's paper. Even the most eminent of scholars can face this situation. Hannes Alfvén[4], Swedish winner of the 1970 Nobel Prize in Physics, once observed:

I have no trouble publishing in Soviet astrophysical journals, but my work is unacceptable to the American astrophysical journals.

There is a relationship between journal impact factor and citations where the journals with the higher impact factors have articles that attract higher citations. While the idealist inside ourselves would attribute the higher citation levels with high research quality, because of the journal it is published in, the pragmatist would say that referencing articles from these journals is more about ease of access to these journals in library databases and political motives than quality alone. A study in *Allergy* 1997 posed that the primary criterion for reference selection was utility rather than quality and found that citation rates of articles were independent of the journal impact factor; in other words, publishing in a high impact factor journal does not necessarily help your individual work get cited (Seglen, 1997). This also means that if your work is high quality and people know about it and therefore cite it, the journal that it is published in is almost irrelevant.

Given the explosion in demand for open access content globally, the issue of where to publish goes beyond the paid access journals of the major publishing companies to the newer journals that offer free access. In marketing, there are few, if any, open access journals with strong quality reputations and impact factors that would tempt scholars to submit their best work. Is this a case of slow diffusion of innovation or will there always be a reputation concern about open access journals? In 2004, an ISI study of citation counts of journals found no difference between the citations of open access and paid access (Pringle, 2004). However, another study, which investigated citation counts of individual articles in the physics field, found that open access articles had increased citation ratios ranging from 2.5 to 5.8 (Harnad and Brody, 2004).

If the aim of research is to influence the body of knowledge then surely publishing in a channel of distribution that enables the maximum number of people access to the knowledge should be the aspiration? The challenge will be how to safeguard the integrity of the peer review process and maintain quality standards while covering the costs (or making a profit).

### Does the writing style matter?

Whatever journal is chosen, the likelihood of the paper being read/downloaded will increase if it is succinct and appears interesting. Writing is important, as many eminent scholars in the past have emphasised. Canadian neuropsychologist, Donald O Hebb[5], observed that:

As far as he can achieve it, readability is as important for the scientific writer as it is for the novelist.

And German mathematician and polymath, Carl Friedrich Gauss[6], stressed the importance of being succinct, however difficult that might prove to be:

You know that I write slowly. This is chiefly because I am never satisfied until I have said as much as possible in a few words, and writing briefly takes far more time than writing at length.

Our decision, as editors of *Journal of Services Marketing*, to reduce the recommended article length from 12,000 to 9,000 words was made with succinctness in mind. This advice applies also to article titles and abstracts. Titles of the form “How A influences B mediated by C and moderated by D” seldom send shivers of anticipation down the spines of fellow scholars. However, as we have witnessed in our spell of editors, papers with short, purposeful titles, such as “Fresh perspectives on customer experiences” (McColl-Kennedy *et al.*, 2015), result in large numbers of downloads which hopefully will translate into citations. Given that many literature searches and subsequent downloads are based on the article title, abstract and keywords, it is important also that the abstract should provide a clear and succinct summary of the theoretical, practical and social implications of the research.

### Whose role is it?

In the past, once a paper was published, authors had to sit back and wait for evidence that their paper had been read. In the current, electronic age, however, there is a far greater opportunity for authors to play a proactive role in creating awareness of their publication to as wide an audience as possible, which brings us back to the question posed earlier: “Whose role it is to build citations – authors? Editors? Associate Editors? Publishers?” The answer is that it is everyone's role. Each one of these stakeholders will benefit from increased citations; the author gains personal prestige and demonstrated impact of their work, the editorial team gains reputational brownie points by publishing notable pieces of research as well as better quality submissions, and the publisher gains an increased impact factor which improves their market appeal and therefore commercial value.

### How to build citations

As the primary audience for this article is authors, we will confine our suggestions to that particular stakeholder group. For the purpose of this section, we are going to assume that you have an article that is interesting, high quality, relevant and makes a unique contribution to your field. In other words, you have a great product/service in search of a communication strategy. How many marketing academics ever sit down to do a marketing plan on their own research, what are the hot topics in the field (demand estimation): what knowledge does the target market desire (product/service development), how much effort and cost are they prepared to pay to find this knowledge (price), will the knowledge come to the target audience or do they need to seek it out (channel), will the knowledge be worth the effort (exchange), is the target market aware of the research and will they share it with others (communication)?

In terms of building citations, we are going to use the standard learning hierarchy; yes, it's the AIDA model. So let's go through each of the stages: gain attention, generate interest, create desire and obtain action.

### Attention

The first step in gaining attention is exposure. When your article is published, how many people even know that it exists? If your journal sends out Table of Contents (TOC) alerts or an e-newsletter then they are certainly helping out, but if they don't, or you want more exposure, then you need to get to work. A major consideration is cutting through the clutter. Thousands of journal articles are published in the marketing discipline each year, so just like advertising, how do you make your brand stand out and be noticed? Here is a list of ideas:

- Tangibilise the knowledge. Some of the best PR campaigns have included tangibles to represent the brand; sending pieces of a chandelier to a launch event of a classy venue (requiring them to bring the piece along). You could post something real to your colleagues along with a QR code to drive traffic to your paper (don't send hard copies as you also want downloads as a short-term measure). If your paper is about airline travel, then send an airline badge, or if about health services, then you could send a pH test strip for water.
- At conferences, if a speaker mentions a topic on which you have published, add a link to your article in the twitter feed.

### Interest

Just because someone notices your article, doesn't mean they will care about it. Think about how many TOCs you scan over and never click on an article, let alone cite it:

- *Media grab*: Write a brief synopsis in journalistic style that is quirky and interesting. You don't have to use all your data, you could use one interesting fact from your study or be controversial – challenge accepted notions.
- *Snappy title*: Your article must have a hook. Sometimes the only part of the article a busy academic sees is the title. Short, sharp and reflective of the contribution, the title must not overpromise but deliver value.

### Desire

Desire is all about bringing out the emotional connection or the sense of urgency to read the article now (or at least soon). The benefits of the research for the reader must be clear for an intention or commitment to develop:

- Video vignettes. Start a Youtube channel (it's really easy and its free), sit in front of your computer with a Web cam and start talking about the paper. Keep it to no more than 5 minutes and talk about the motivation for the study, key findings, and any interesting behind the scenes facts, tips and hints. Some journals will add a link to your video next to your article. Share the video on social media sites. Better yet, ask your colleagues to comment and share it. The benefit of having your videos on a Youtube channel is that if people like your video, they will then watch your other videos (cross-promotion) – so make sure you have the link to the journal article with each video you upload.
- Create a blog that offers tips and advice on your topic – become to “go to” person for the field. On this blog, host links to your articles and videos.
- People like exclusivity – if you can offer people who follow you/friend you/join your email group something before everyone else then you are on a winner. An idea could be

a breakfast club at a conference where you discuss the topic that is central to your paper, solicit feedback on the paper and possibly build a research agenda for further research. If you really want to make this work well, invite some notable scholars to come along, workshop the ideas and turn it into a commentary piece for a journal.

### Action

The measurable outcomes that you are seeking are citations – the first step action point to this is downloads. This means making access to your articles super-easy for people. An essential item is a full-text publicly available version on a free repository (many universities now offer this). The most important part of achieving action is the right timing. When people are at “the point of consumption”, they are more likely to use your research:

- Include a line in your email signature about your publications – this could be about a specific article (remember make it interesting) or a general line such as “Interested in my publications – click here”.
- Sometimes, journals will give free access for a short time-period to an article. If you are presenting at an event, ask the editor if they could make the article free for a week so that you can tweet or email the link to people. Timing is a really important part of generating action – strike while the iron is hot.
- When you know a colleague is working on a project that is relevant to your published research, send them a short overview of the paper with a link. Again timing.
- Seasonality is important. Do academics read articles over the summer break? Are they interested in receiving updates on recent publications during exam time? Pick your moment and make sure you time your “news” for maximum effect.

### Conclusion

Throughout time, for research to have value it needs to be published read and cited and the mantra for many business schools has been *publish or perish*. In this day and age, competition for publication is intense. The quality of writing, especially succinctness, matters and so too does generating citations. Citations are extremely important for authors as well as journal editors and publishers. There are solid grounds for asking authors to play a more proactive role in raising awareness of their published research to draw attention to their published work, with the aim of increasing downloads and citations. In other words, authors need to co-create the value provided by their research and not rely solely on the producer of the journal. Hopefully, we have provided sound arguments for the importance of citations over impact factors and given some useful tips on how to generate them.

### Notes

- 1 From “De L'Utilité des Pensions”, *Œuvres complètes de François Arago* (1855), Vol. 3, p. 621.
- 2 J.R. Gladstone, Michael Faraday (1872), p. 122.
- 3 As quoted and cited in David A. Kronick, *The Literature of the Life Sciences: Reading, Writing, Research* (1985), p. 89.

- 4 Quoted in Anthony L. Peratt, “Dean of the Plasma Dissidents”, Washington Times, supplement: The World and I (May 1988), p. 197
- 5 Excerpted and cited in Ritchie R. Ward, Practical Technical Writing (1968), p. 33.
- 6 Quoted in G. Simmons, Calculus Gems (1992).

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