Interview with "AMS Great Mind" Dr. Tomas Hult

By Cinthia Beccacece Satornino

Executive Briefing: Doctoral student, Cinthia Beccacece Satornino from Florida State University, served as the "new mind" interviewing Dr. Tomas Hult of Michigan State University as a part of the Academy of Marketing Science's "AMS Great Mind" series. The interview focuses the trinity of research success: research productivity, successful co-authorship, and publishing, from Dr. Hult's unique perspective as a prolific and successful researcher who also serves as the editor to one of our more prestigious journals, the Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science (JAMS). The interview was first published in the AMS Newsletter, May 2014 (AMS Newsletter Editor: Diana Haytko; AMS Great Mind Section Editor: Angeline Close Scheinbaum).

Cinthia Beccacece Satornino: You have earned many accolades and awards throughout your career, including being elected a Fellow of the Academy of International Business – a rare honor for a marketing scholar. What is your proudest accomplishment as a scholar, and why?

Tomas Hult: I like that you anchored the accomplishments as a "scholar" to this question since my proudest overall moments are really family oriented and not really scholarly oriented. I also have some great memories and proud moments playing tennis against Stefan Edberg and other former top players! But if we stick with scholarship, being elected as the second youngest member of the Fellows of the Academy of International Business has to be the one. Peter Buckley was elected a few decades ago when he was 35 and I was elected at the age of 42 in 2010. At this time, there are only about 80 AIB Fellows; each elected based on their "contributions to the scholarly development of the field of international business," with a couple of them also being Nobel Prize winners (Oliver Williamson and Douglass North).

Satornino: You have provided meaningful contributions in terms of service to the discipline both at MSU, at the Academy, and in practitioner focused organizations, and you still find time to share with organizations dedicated to cultivating doctoral students, like the PhD Project and the Sheth Consortium. Yet, despite the heavy commitments, you have managed to remain extremely research productive. What is your secret?

Hult: That's an intense question with lots of tangents! I appreciate your sentiment though about being able to provide service in various ways and also managing to consistently publish in top journals. As a former athlete, the cliché "best athlete" really resonates with me. By that, I mean that I strive to be productive in research while contributing at a high level in service to the field and in teaching as well. In some way, this strategy was also my tennis strategy on the court! My strokes (forehand, backhand, serve, and so on) were all pretty good. But since Swedish players at the time (in the 1980s and 1990s) were mainly baseline players with a preference for clay courts, my objective was to develop great strokes in all areas.

The same held true for scholarship when I first started; my goal was to develop a strong portfolio of research, service contributions, teaching of university students and business executives, and so-called outreach to the communities in which I lived. As it turned out, my research productivity, interestingly, to me, is a function of synergistically connecting the dots across research ideas, teaching of executives, and outreach to business and public policy communities. Basically, I think I have found a nice niche in research – combining international business, supply chain management, and marketing strategy – that carries well in research, executive training, and business outreach.

Satornino: You, along with your colleagues at MSU and Duke University, have been granted an impressive $5 million grant from the National Science Foundation. What advice can you offer to scholars on securing major grants, what were the greatest obstacles and how did you overcome them?

Hult: The $5 million grant involving a pretty large team from Michigan State University and Duke University is unique to me as well. And, I am only a small part of that five-year project on "water, energy, and commerce." Now, this NSF grant is a nice microcosm of how I'd like to handle contracts and grants from external sources. I strive to assemble teams of researchers and relevant individuals and organizations to capture the core competencies needed for specific grants. Then, my goal is always to directly address the RFP issues as opposed to write only on topics that I am the most comfortable with. This often means that I either need to develop new competencies or bring on board individuals with the needed competencies. But this also means that, over time, I have developed a nice set of competencies that are relevant for U.S. Federal agencies, State of Michigan agencies, and manufacturing companies in the region. Number-wise, at Michigan State, we are talking about roughly 170 people that I connect with inside and outside the Eli Broad College of Business for the contracts and grants that I engage in.

Satornino: Your fundraising track record is remarkable, especially in light of your service and research commitments. What suggestions do you have for advanced scholars making the transition to administration and, therefore, being tasked with increasing fundraising responsibilities?

Hult: First off, I am a bit odd here in that I don't think anyone should transition completely into administration. It would be remarkable tough to come back to being a scholar later on without keeping up with top-notch research. It may be that instead of several articles per year, a person does one or just a few but totally moving into administration is not logical until you reach positions above deans to me. In fact, when I looked into being dean and was also offered opportunities to serve in that capacity, I stressed in the interview process that I thought it was very important that a dean could have continued credibility in research.

Now, fund raising is a unique aspect of the administrative positions that we have in academe – more so in the U.S. than other countries, but many countries are now stressing fund raising more and more. In some way, there are very few scholars that can develop high-level fund raising opportunities that are transferable to multiple universities. Instead, scholars that stick around the same university for a period of time, engage in the local/regional community, and develop win-win relationships with businesses and individuals in the community have a better chance of also being successful than scholars who seek out different university opportunities frequently. Sure, some corporate relationships are nationwide and worldwide but even then these relationships are partly tied to you as an individual and your university as a core competency issue. They key as always in fund raising is to make sure that potential donors are nurtured to give some periodically and ultimately more and more, while strategically jointly with the donor, over time, figure out how they can best leverage their wealth to leave a mark at Michigan State University commensurate with their interests.

My mind operates the same by the way. My wife Laurie and I have established endowments at our undergraduate alma mater – Murray State University – and at Michigan State University for study abroad scholarships. Being from Sweden, I feel like I am still on study abroad! Study abroad was also an important part of Laurie's education. We transitioned to give endowment level money by donating something every year for a couple of decades. After we felt comfortable with the idea of establishing something more permanent and what it would be, we decided to establish these two study abroad endowments. Our minds are not unique in this, many donors find this little-by-little giving to be a precursor to something more grandiose, and the level of grandiose-ness is of course tied to the individual. Raising funds from corporations is, in some way, easier but also somewhat the same. Both individuals and organizations really look for return-on-investment; we just have to figure out what each person's or organization's ROI is.

Satornino: You have been the long standing editor of the Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, and I'm sure you have experienced both the best (and the worst) of heading a premier marketing journal. If you could change anything about the process of publishing, what would it be, and why?

Hult: It has been a tremendous privilege and honor to serve as Editor of the Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science for two terms, from 2009 to 2015 by the time I am done. I was obviously very flattered to be trusted with the journal in 2009 and the gratification of being renewed for another term in 2012 was both unusual for JAMS and highly unexpected for me. But the best may be that numerous people asked about my interest to even continue beyond those terms. However, six years for a journal such as JAMS is more than plenty for any one Editor at this stage of the journal's development. As a field, I don't think we need to have an Editor gatekeeper for longer; authors, reviewers, and readers want newness and in some case a different take after a period of time. I think, for me, six years is plenty to have an impact as an Editor and it is time for the next period of the journal to start in 2015.

In some way, a lot has changed during my term since 2009. JAMS did not have any social media platforms in 2009 and now we are everywhere (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn). The LinkedIn group has more than 3,000 members, and the level of transparency of the journal is uniquely high compared with most of our peers. Social media is used to communicate with authors, potential authors, reviewers, and other interested parties about acceptance rates, newly accepted articles, and lots of other issues. This also means that the cycle time from submission to the public knowing about an accepted article is much faster these days. Review times for JAMS are about 30 days for first round reviews and much faster for subsequent rounds. And time to in-print is also remarkable fast after an article has been accepted.

That said, at about a seven percent acceptance rate in 2013 and forecasted rate of perhaps even lower in 2014, we are rejecting a lot of good articles (perhaps even great articles). The more an article gets rejected – say at journal A, then journal B, then journal C – the more outdated the paper becomes in the field. At the same time, most manuscripts have some unique (hidden) gem that can be brought out. Unfortunately, the potential for citations and impact of an article when it drops to a lower level journal is drastically diminished and the newness is also reduced since the study is becoming older through its many cycles of reviews before acceptance. With the current structure of scholarly journals, there is not much a journal Editor can do more than operate a fast, quality, and impactful review process. At the back-end of the process, there are numerous opportunities to promote published articles to various constituency groups but at the front-end (i.e., review process) the options are somewhat limited.

As an author, I think it would be "fun" to be able to send your manuscript to multiple journals at the same time and, in essence, have the journals compete to publish your work! In some way, it's kind of silly that journals have a monopoly on your research until they decide they don't want to publish it. Competition among Editors and journals may help in that Editors and reviewers really have to work hard at finding and bringing out the (hidden) gem in every paper, if possible, and then make decisions faster with fewer review cycles and shorter review periods. Now, there are major drawbacks with such an approach obviously – the biggest being speed may adversely affect quality and ultimately impact.

Satornino: You have worked with many accomplished scholars throughout your career. What have you learned about navigating the intricacies of successful co-authorships, such as establishing deadlines, roles, and co-authorship order?

Hult: I think I have coauthored with more than 100 scholars over the years but effectively there are only about a dozen or so that I have regularly engaged in research. One reason for the many coauthors is connected to the many doctoral students I have mentored over the years. In many cases, I do some publications with most of my doctoral students which add to the totals of coauthors. The dozen or so of my regular coauthors are often a function of people in related or the same fields as I am interested in and at the same level or drive in publishing. In many cases, this means that these coauthors have progressed in the field at the same pace as I have. For example, I have most frequently coauthored with David Ketchen – 27 journal publications so far and the majority in top journals. Dave and I graduated roughly the same years, got promoted roughly at the same time, and achieved various positions and accolades roughly at the same time. Another example is Stan Slater who I have published 11 articles with (7 jointly with Eric Olson); Stan is more senior in the field than I am but we share very similar interests and, as such, sought each other out because of those interests.

Given that my motivation for seeking out coauthors was based on similarity in interests and similarity in drive to publish, establishing deadlines and roles always seemed to come easy. Regarding co-authorship, very rarely did I have a preference for where my name needed to be listed on a paper and nor did my coauthors. I can only think of one coauthor who consistently asked to be first author regardless of what s/he did on the paper, and I have opted not to work with that person any more. If authorship is really even a discussion point before the paper is about to be accepted, the focus is usually, to me, not on developing a quality paper as much as it should be.

My logic, as is the case for many in our profession, is that whoever came up with and crystalized the idea should be first author on the paper (almost) regardless of the amount of work actually done on the paper. We are in the idea business, not the implementation business, and ideas should largely drive the first author choice with subsequent authorship being a function of contribution in implementing the study or conceptual paper.

Satornino: As a follow up to that question: What are the most unique qualities of your co-authors that you believe helped establish a successful team dynamic and led to successful publication?

Hult: Co-authors should have the same drive to publish in the level of journals you want to publish in; they should be deadline-setters themselves; and they should have a clear unique trait in publishing (i.e., great at theory, methods, methodology, and/or managerial implications). Presumably, I have those characteristics as well… but the logic is that if a coauthor has an amazing ability or knowledge in one area, the "veto power" for that section of the paper can be mostly connected to that coauthor, and I can focus and be allowed to focus (i.e., have veto power) on other sections of the paper. The weakest coauthors are those who rely on you to make sure that each section is of the quality expected for the publication targeted; the second worst are those who are average in everything. Then the workload and burden falls squarely on you to make sure the paper is of high-quality, and that is a task that is difficult to stay motivated on for a long period of time. I rather work with a person who is rather weak in an area of the paper but has strengths in other areas.

Satornino: The marketing field has evolved greatly in the past three decades, with advances in methodological techniques, new theoretical insights, a rise in cross-national research and more. What advances or changes do you believe have made the biggest impact on the field to date?

Hult: Methodologically, the advances are pretty clear – from simplistic tools for statistical analysis to complex and robust multivariate tools. Unfortunately some of these advances come and go – basically are in vogue or not – even though some should stay and some should be dismissed for technical reasons and not popularity. Plus, some scholars either act as cheerleaders for certain techniques or decide to criticize certain techniques unfairly based on their interests. As an Editor, I'd like to see the authors justify the use of a particular technique, why it is the best for the occasion, and then also illustrate why other techniques are inferior in the context of the study. So, I think the biggest change that had greatest impact in the 1980s and 1990s was the drastically increase use of multivariate statistical techniques in the field of marketing.

But I think that the increased theoretical rigor, and expectation, in marketing articles in the 2000s, and especially in the 2010s, has and will make an even larger impact on the field. The clichés are endless but the logic behind "there is nothing as practical as a good theory" resonates with me and any in our field. For JAMS, I developed the logic that I wanted JAMS to be "a *top journal choice for scholars seeking to publish their highest-quality, theoretically-sound and managerially relevant research in marketing."* I really do believe that the marriage of theory (and conceptualization), method (context), methodology (statistical analysis), and managerial relevance (implications and gaps filled) are critical to solid contributions in our field. This is not to say that all areas have to be top-notch but the focus should be on those four when developing a paper, with at least one area being leading-edge to be published in a top journal.

Satornino: As a follow up to that question: What changes do you believe need to take place in the training of doctoral students, if any, in light of these advancements and changes?

Hult: I find it somewhat remarkable that most doctoral programs in marketing have limited the number of actual marketing courses taken. And, more pressing, I think it is a huge disservice to the field of marketing that many marketing doctoral programs have cut out "history of marketing," "marketing theory," and "macro marketing" (policy) issues altogether. Plus, the vast majority of marketing programs only offer really one marketing strategy course that is actually "strategy." Somehow many programs have adopted the idea that "strategy" is a form of "marketing management" and that almost all topics are "strategy" oriented. This is simply not true! So, at the basics level, I'd like to see more marketing strategy courses being offered in marketing doctoral programs plus at least a theory-building seminar as a foundation. The history and macro aspects can perhaps be part of seminars, if not being dedicated seminars.

Given my interests in international topics, it would also be easy for me to suggest that international marketing should be at the forefront of the field. But I also realize that data collection is difficult at the doctoral student stage (or any level) when it comes to international marketing. So, a better suggestion for a possible change in doctoral education is that all doctoral students should be trained in the pedagogical aspects of the profession as a component of their programs – some are but many still are not. And, doctoral students should be exposed to master level (e.g., MBA) teaching as a part of their training as well. Almost exclusively, the top universities hire new colleagues who have potential as MBA teachers and can also do premier research, with the assumption that new assistant professors will be good teachers in the MBA classroom within a couple of years after being hired (and in plenty of time before tenure). Actually figuring out who will be good in the MBA classroom is a much tougher task though, and any programmatic indication that a scholar will do well with MBAs would help the profession.

Satornino: Given your international ties and focus on international business issues via the International Business Center at MSU, you have a worldview perspective on marketing practice and scholarship. From that unique perspective, what do you see as the future of marketing in light of increasing globalization?

Hult: First, I really like what I see and what I think the trends are. Specifically, I think we are moving as a profession toward a more homogeneous set of research criteria around the world while also becoming more aware of the unique and great aspects of various forms of research. We can no longer say that Europeans publish only case studies; Latin Americans rarely publish in English-speaking journals (as also the French used to do!), and that Asian-based research is more modeling oriented than anything else. As a disclaimer, I may have used old stereotypes that in reality were not even true but let's go with the ones I mentioned in the previous sentence for now. Assuming they were ever true, I don't think this is the case any longer for the top researchers around the world. It may be that the second tier researchers in each of these areas still prefer certain ways of doing research but the submissions to JAMS, among others, indicate that worldwide researchers are very familiar with the state-of-the-art tool kit for doing research and select the appropriate focus, as needed, to contribute to the field.

In some way, worldwide basketball has seen a similar transition from the U.S. "dream team" of 1992 that won each of their games by an average of 43.8 points and had no competition to subsequent (less than) dream teams that lost a lot of games to improved international competition. This is not to say that the U.S. approach to research is the best, it is simply to say that the game has been elevated to a level where homogeneity in contribution is a good thing instead of heterogeneity (which is often the case) being the preferred method. We will see more and better equipped researchers worldwide in the field of marketing in the coming years, and co-authorship across the globe flourish even more.

Satornino: You were the third most cited marketing scholar in the world from 1997 – 2007, according to Thomson Reuters. After such an extraordinary track record, what is next for you?

Hult: All these rankings we have are interesting, aren't they? Yes, apparently I was the number 75th "most cited scientist in economics and business" in the period from 1997-2007 based on the Thomson Reuter's ranking (the outfit that does the journal impact scores). I had no idea until a couple of years after that ranking came out when Stan Slater sent it to me. I also like the ranking that Aguinis et al. (2012) did in the Academy of Management Perspectives that had me as the 6th most cited scholar who received their degrees since 1991 (I got my Ph.D. in 1995); the author team sent that paper to everyone who showed up high on the list!

At the moment, I continue diligently targeting top journals for my interests (typically Academy of Management Journal, Strategic Management Journal, Journal of International Business Studies, along with some marketing journals). But I'm also engaging in both textbook and trade book writing more and more. Together with George Yip, I had Total Global Strategy come out in 2012 (Pearson). Together with David Closs and David Frayer, I had Global Supply Chain Management come out in 2014 (McGraw-Hill Professional). And in early 2015, I will have an International Business book come out as well. Plus, I'm starting an Internet-based monthly radio show in June 2014, with interviews of scholars, business professionals, and policy makers focused on international business (to be housed on our world-leading globalEDGE.msu.edu site; #1 ranked worldwide for "international business resources" with users in all countries daily).

Satornino: To end on a fun note: So many scholars look up to you professionally, and admire your career – I personally witnessed many doctoral students "geeking out" at having an opportunity to interact with you at the Sheth Consortium. Do you "geek out" when meeting a scholar you admire? Who is your role model and why?

Hult: Absolutely! There are so many scholars I admire and "geek out" with when I have the chance! In international business, for example, I had the chance to spend significant time with Geert Hofstede, our time's leading scholar on culture in my capacity as Executive Director of the Academy of International Business. In my role as President of the Sheth Foundation, I was fortunate to spend time with Phil Kotler last summer when the Foundation awarded the inaugural Sheth Medal (real gold!) to Kotler for his "enduring and transformational contributions to both marketing scholarship and practice." Plus in my role as Editor of JAMS, I engaged with Oliver Williamson (who won the Nobel Prize in 2009) on an invited article he published in JAMS on transaction cost economics. These three scholars are amazing in what they have accomplished, how they approach their work, and how they handle themselves.

But I will pick my great friend and fellow Swedish citizen, Claes Fornell, as my role model. For one, since we regularly play tennis, have lunch, and see each other, he will get a kick out of my selection! But, more importantly, I really admire my 20-year senior Swede for his amazing high-quality research in both substantive (customer satisfaction) and statistical areas (structural equation modeling, PLS) while also having built several companies from scratch with hundreds of employees worldwide. And he did it using his "satisfaction formula" which really illustrates that "there is nothing as practical as a good theory." Fornell's connecting the dots between theory, statistical rigor, practical relevance, and impact at individual, organizational, and country levels is remarkable and admirable. I appreciate the unique multi-level impact he has in our field and profession, and I think he can serve as a great role model for many scholars including myself.

I truly appreciate the opportunity to be part of the "AMS Great Mind" Series!

Satornino Closing Thought: Our conversation included many other topics, such as the innovative ways that Dr. Hult and the JAMS team are using social media to bring academics together and promote both JAMS and the work of contributing authors, as well as the unique mentoring approach used for incoming new faculty at MSU. Dr. Hult is an insightful, friendly, and witty conversationalist, with a lot of experience in the field and a willingness to share those experiences. It was truly an honor to be given the opportunity to have one-on-one time with this “Great Mind!” Thank you to AMS, Dr. Angeline Close Scheinbaum, and Dr. Tomas Hult.

About

Tomas Hult, Ph.D., is Professor, Byington Endowed Chair, and Director of the International Business Center in the Eli Broad College of Business at Michigan State University. He is also Executive Director of the Academy of International Business, with members in some 90 countries, and President of the Sheth Foundation. http://broad.msu.edu/facultystaff/hult.

Cinthia B. Satornino, is a fourth year doctoral candidate at Florida State University, and will join the Northeastern University faculty in the summer of 2014. Her research focuses primarily on social systems and networks, with a specific focus on creativity, power, and social influence. Prior to academia, Cinthia served as a leader in both corporate and institutional settings for over 12 years.

Academy of Marketing Science (AMS) is a member organization mainly focused on academic scholarship in marketing. AMS was founded in 1971, is the owner of the *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, and has a global reach and impact. The interview was first published in the AMS Newsletter, May 2014 (Editor: Diana Haytko; AMS Great Mind Editor: Angeline Close). More can be found at: http://www.ams-web.org.