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# Editorial: An Update on the Frontiers Section

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**Abstract.** Frontiers is a new section positioned as a prestigious subbrand under the *Marketing Science* umbrella. Its purpose is to encourage and nurture timely research with potentially high impact in quantitative marketing with a differentiated format and review process. In this issue, we publish the first set of three papers in Frontiers. This editorial describes (i) the papers and how they fit the goals of Frontiers and (ii) the minor changes in the Frontiers' review process to improve efficiency and consistency for both authors and the journal.

## 1. Introduction

In 2018, *Marketing Science* announced Frontiers, a new section, positioned as a prestigious subbrand of the journal focused on publishing timely research with potentially high impact in the field of quantitative marketing (Sudhir 2018). Though *Marketing Science* has led the field of quantitative marketing research in introducing a large number of new substantive research and methods (Sudhir 2016), there is a perceptible sense among many scholars that the standard format of articles published across the leading journals (and the long, multiyear, multiround review process) often stymied the production publication of high impact work in a timely manner. Timely publication of contemporaneously relevant research—either substantive or methodological—is important for the field to gain influence in setting the agenda for academic scholarship or have a voice in managerial and policy debates. How can the field facilitate and increase incentives to scholars to compete on producing and publishing timely work with potentially high impact?

Frontiers is designed with a differentiated format and review process to encourage authors to invest and compete in time-sensitive research with potentially high impact.<sup>1</sup> The section encourages submissions from every substantive and methodological area of quantitative marketing. Frontiers papers are expected to be on focused questions with clear contemporaneous academic, managerial, or policy relevance. The clarity of focus allows the main ideas and results of the papers to be communicated in a 6,000-word format in the main published paper, and additional analysis to assure robustness and validity of the results are published in an online appendix that is easily accessible to all readers. The emphasis on focused research questions and the use of a short format in which the main message is emphasized are design features to maximize the potential impact of the

paper. I describe later in the article how the review process is designed to speed publication without sacrificing rigor. Frontiers papers are expected to have the same high quality and rigor as regular *Marketing Science* papers because only then can the field have faith in the paper's results for it to have the desired impact.

The goal of the journal is for Frontiers papers to be seen as equally prestigious as regular papers in the promotion and tenure processes for scholars. When authors have ideas that are clearly focused and have contemporaneous academic, managerial, or policy relevance, the journal encourages authors to target Frontiers as the appropriate outlet. Authors benefit because the paper has been certified by the review process to be not only rigorously validated, but also to be important and of potentially high impact on a contemporaneously relevant substantive or methodological issue. Further, the paper receives priority for early publication. The certification and speed of publication can help the paper garner extra attention by being a first mover and be rewarded with more follow-up work by other authors and citations.

## 2. The First Set of Papers

This issue publishes the first set of three papers in the new Frontiers section. Before describing the papers, let me begin with how Frontiers papers should be cited. Frontiers papers should be cited with "Frontiers: ..." prefixed in front of the paper's title (see references to the papers at the end of this editorial). Google Scholar will automatically produce citations with "Frontiers:" in the title, and using the prefix in citations will ensure that Google Scholar accurately counts the cites to the papers. Given that Frontiers has a clear and distinct positioning as a subbrand of *Marketing Science*, the journal *requires* that this format be used consistently when citing Frontiers articles and listing them in author resumes.

Neumann et al. (2019) addresses an important question routinely facing advertisers: how accurate are the consumer demographic and attitudinal interest profiles sold by data brokers to marketers for ad targeting, and are the costs worth the benefits of targeting? Using field experiments, they find that accuracy rates for demographic profiling are quite low and not very different from random guessing, but audience interest (sports, travel, fitness) profiles improve accuracy relative to random guessing by 30%–71%. Even with audience profiles, when costs of targeting are taken into account, channels vary in their level of return on investment (ROI), and many of the lower-priced media placements potentially deliver negative ROI. Given the critical importance of the quality and value of data profiles from data brokers to advertisers, we expect the paper to set the agenda for further systematic research on whether and when data for ad targeting can be valuable.

Wang et al. (2019) contribute to the contemporary debate on recreational cannabis legalization by addressing how such legalization impacts substitute products, such as alcohol and tobacco. Given that demand data on cannabis is not widely available, they use internet search data as a proxy for demand to address the question and exploit variations in timing of laws passed across different states for identification of the cross-category effects. They find that cross-substitution effects of cannabis are greater for alcohol than for tobacco. Further, they find that the effect on search is more among adult segments than on youth. With several states still considering legalization, the paper advances the goal of contributing to contemporary policy and managerial debate and also promotes an agenda of other policy-relevant questions on the topic.

Luo et al. (2019) address the question of customer receptivity to artificial intelligence (AI) as embodied in chatbots. Using field experiments, they find that, within a very structured setting of interaction between customers and service providers, the technology performs well and, in fact, beats humans in generating sales provided consumers are not aware that the chatbot is a machine. However, human acceptance of chatbots is a challenge; when consumers learn that they are talking to a chatbot, they observe a substantial drop in sales performance. As the interface between AI and humans becomes a central issue for marketers and society more broadly, such early work in quantitative marketing can contribute to the debate and set the agenda of research.

The three papers are illustrative of the goals we set out in creating the Frontiers section as a prestigious subbrand with potentially high impact. First, as already noted, all the papers answer timely and important substantive questions of interest to a broad audience and are clearly relevant to one or more stakeholders for our research—other researchers, consumers, managers,

or regulators. However, it should be emphasized that authors should not read more into the types of topics, methods, and research styles that are preferred at Frontiers based simply on the characteristics of these three papers. For example, although these published papers are all substantive and empirical, Frontiers is very open to diverse types of research, including methodological and theoretical papers.

Second, they answer these questions with the high level of rigor expected of a regular *Marketing Science* article. Beyond what is included in the main body of the paper, the papers have extensive robustness checks in online appendices that assure validity of the claims, and thus, stakeholders can be confident in the results as they debate issues. This, of course, has the benefit for the journal that Frontiers is seen as a prestigious subbrand, and when the field perceives it this way, authors are encouraged and incentivized to invest in such research. Early and timely publication generates extra attention and longer-term impact.

Some authors have expressed concern about whether the short format with fast processing at Frontiers may diminish the field's quality perceptions of their papers. The journal wants to be very clear as to why we require the short 6,000-word format for Frontiers. First, Frontiers papers should have clearly focused research questions with high impact potential. With focused research questions, presentation of the key research in the short format is not only feasible, it is also desirable in that it improves impact by encouraging authors to write carefully in a manner that does not distract from the central message and contributions of the paper. The short and clear presentation with only the most important aspects of the analysis detailed in the main paper can enable quicker diffusion of the published ideas. This style is modeled after papers in *Science*, in which many of the robustness checks necessary to address the validity and rigor requirements of the journal are included in online appendices that are easily accessible from the journal's website. Further, I strongly believe that writing effectively and concisely in a shorter format is harder and takes more time—so authors should choose Frontiers not because it is easy or quicker, but because they want greater impact for their ideas. A quote often attributed to Mark Twain (with no evidence of it being written by him) in a letter to a friend comes to mind: "I didn't have time to write a short letter, so I wrote a long one instead."<sup>2</sup>

Finally, we promised a faster review cycle at Frontiers to ensure that timely research with high potential for impact is published quickly. Typically, there is a trade-off in balancing rigor (which takes time) and speed to publication. There are several aspects of design that allow Frontiers to publish quickly, conditional on achieving the rigor expected of *Marketing Science*.

First, shorter papers with focused contributions are easier to evaluate and, therefore, can be reviewed more quickly. Second, focused contribution claims also mean fewer ways in which robustness needs to be assessed once the review team has assessed that the potential contribution is important enough to be in the Frontiers section. Finally, the review process is designed to shorten review times and prioritizes Frontiers papers to get to print once accepted. Overall, these design features improve speed to publication without sacrificing rigor.

### 3. Journal Experience with Frontiers

#### 3.1. The Statistics

Table 1 summarizes the submissions and outcomes during the period January 2018–August 2019. Overall, the Frontiers section has had a good start. In the first 20 months, we have made decisions on 65 papers. Overall, the average review time was 45 days—much lower than those for regular submissions and consistent with our promise of greater speed.

We rejected 41 of the 65 papers with eight desk rejects; that is, 63% of the papers were rejected in the first round. Contrary to our initial plans, none of the submissions received “conditional accept” in the first round. In addition, 24 of the 65 papers (i.e., 37%) received a “reject and resubmit.” Of the seven papers that have been resubmitted so far, four were conditionally accepted (with three already accepted and in this issue), and three were rejected.

Because “major revision” or “minor revision” are not options available at Frontiers, the reject and resubmit set includes what would be “revise and resubmit” and reject and resubmit decisions for regular submissions. Overall, we have been more generous in offering reject and resubmits at Frontiers to help them refine their papers and get it right based on feedback, especially as authors are still learning how to write for Frontiers. Thus, the 37% is somewhat higher than the 31% of revisions and reject and resubmits given for regular submissions.

**Table 1.** Submission and Outcome Statistics for Frontiers (January 2018–August 2019)

|                          |    |
|--------------------------|----|
| Initial submissions      |    |
| Total with decisions     | 65 |
| Outcomes                 |    |
| Desk reject              | 8  |
| Reject                   | 33 |
| Reject and resubmit      | 24 |
| Resubmissions            |    |
| Number resubmitted       | 7  |
| Outcomes                 |    |
| Conditional accept       | 4  |
| Reject                   | 3  |
| Average time to decision | 45 |

#### 3.2. Reject and Resubmit Categories

The reject and resubmits included three classes of papers.

1. “Encouraging” Reject and Resubmit: When there was good agreement between the associate editor (AE) and editor in chief (EIC) about the fit with Frontiers (in terms of timeliness, importance/potential impact) and the likelihood that the manuscript would converge in a resubmission, the reject and resubmit request was highly encouraging. The journal did take more risks with this category than major revisions for regular papers. This is reflected in the higher level of rejection for even the encouraged resubmissions. As noted earlier, thus far, we have received seven resubmissions from the “encouraged reject and resubmit” category; three of these seven were rejected, and four were conditionally accepted.

2. “Standard” Reject and Resubmit: The second and largest category of reject and resubmits are similar to the reject and resubmit for regular papers, with which the journal provides detailed feedback on how a successful paper could be recrafted for Frontiers. Such a paper would be a very different paper and, therefore, subject to a new review process with potentially different members on the review team.

3. “Send as Regular Paper” Reject and Resubmit: Finally, for a small number of cases, the authors were asked to revise and expand the paper and resubmit the paper as a full-length regular paper to *Marketing Science* as the paper either did not meet the Frontiers criterion of timeliness or contemporaneous relevance or did not naturally fit the criterion of a clear, concise, and focused contribution that fit with the Frontier’s short format requirements.

#### 3.3. Overall Assessment

Though the acceptance rate thus far of 6.2% may appear lower than that for regular submissions, note that we have not reached steady state for eventual acceptance rates. Many of our encouraging resubmits are likely to be resubmitted and accepted over the next year. In steady state, the journal expects the number of submissions to Frontiers to be about 15%–20% of all submissions. With similar acceptance rates as regular submissions in steady state, the expectation is to publish about 8–10 Frontiers papers every year. However, the journal is very open to publishing more papers if and when we receive high-quality Frontiers submissions.

Overall, this is very promising news and meets the journal’s expectations in terms of both author submissions and reviewer/AE receptivity and their care toward differentiated evaluation for Frontiers. Frontiers has indeed drawn new types of research papers with sharply focused and contemporaneously relevant and timely research questions with potential

long-term impact. Such papers will either open up new research areas or enable the field to have a seat at the relevant debate tables. The reviewers and AE have been very willing to accept the spirit of the need for differentiated evaluation criterion (timeliness, importance, and focused research questions), judging the contributions accordingly and providing timely turnaround. Accepted Frontiers papers have the high level of rigor and validity as regular papers—as with regular papers, the test is always whether the paper's claims are “sufficiently validated” to have confidence in them.

#### 4. Changes in the Review Process for Frontiers

In my 2018 editorial introducing Frontiers (Sudhir 2018), I outlined the review process for Frontiers. Based on experience over the last 20 months, I am tweaking aspects of the review process to make it more efficient from the journal's and authors' perspectives. Two distinguishing features of the initial Frontiers review process were a (i) first round conditional accept or “out” and (ii) the use of a dedicated, small AE team focused on Frontiers, who would choose reviewers and whose final recommendations would be mostly accepted by the editor-in-chief. Although the conditional accept or out decision was intended to facilitate timely publication, the use of the dedicated AE team was to have a set of scholars dedicated to Frontiers' success and also deliver timely decisions.

My experience in the last two years has made me realize that these two features need to be tweaked.

##### 4.1. “Invitation to Resubmit” as a New Outcome

I have decided to name the encouraging reject and resubmit decision as an invitation to resubmit decision. We have found that the first round conditional accept is a low (or close to zero) probability event for the authors to attain. The current option of encouraging reject and resubmit creates confusion about the journal's message to the authors and for authors who wish to communicate the status of the paper to the field and to their school for promotion and review evaluation. In contrast, the invitation to resubmit communicates the positive nature of the recommendation but still suggests that the paper needs significant changes and is riskier than a major revision. Further, with an invitation to resubmit, authors are guaranteed the same review team of AEs and reviewers, which reduces risk and, thus, should encourage authors to pursue the changes requested. To be clear, this outcome is only available for Frontiers submissions; regular submissions will continue to have major and minor revision requests along with reject and resubmit.

##### 4.2. No Dedicated AE Team

My experience with the variety of papers that have been submitted under Frontiers suggests that having the flexibility of a large number of AEs with the appropriate and specialized knowledge on the topic is valuable. At the same time, for consistency of decision making across articles, it is useful to have a common decision point at the top that is clear about the goals of Frontiers and sets common standards across articles. At least until these norms and standards are common knowledge and diffused across the profession, I believe a more diverse set of AEs who are encouraged to think about the differentiated criteria for Frontiers, with the EIC providing the standardization across all submissions, will lead to better overall outcomes. Thus, AEs will still choose the review team and have significant influence on the final decision, but the EIC will closely discuss and ensure consistent standards across submissions.

Given the experience thus far, I expect that Frontiers papers will typically have an invitation to resubmit round before they get a conditional accept. This round will definitely delay the turnaround time relative to what was originally envisaged. Yet the faster cycle times within each round, the guaranteed conditional accept or reject upon resubmission, and prioritization of Frontiers papers for print upon acceptance will still ensure that Frontiers papers have a significantly faster route to publication than regular papers.

Based on discussions with the AE, editorial review board, advisory board, and many faculty, this trade-off of a slightly longer turnaround in return for the same high level of rigor and prestige in terms of paper quality seems a worthwhile balance. This will ensure Frontiers papers are seen as prestigious and generate the investments needed from our best and most creative authors while rewarding them with faster times to print and flagging their work as important, timely, and relevant. Further, as authors and review teams become familiar with the Frontiers norms and expectations, we may be able to further speed up turnaround times as initial submissions get closer to achieving conditional acceptance in the first round itself.

#### Conclusion

The standard format and review processes at leading journals have stymied the publication of timely work with high impact and, thus, do not sufficiently incentivize authors to do such work. It is important for quantitative marketing to encourage and reward authors to work and publish on timely questions with high impact potential so that the field has a place at the table and influence on academic, managerial, and policy debates and decision making. By creating a prestigious subbrand of *Marketing Science* and

assuring a faster path to publication for timely papers with potentially high impact, the new Frontiers section seeks to incentivize authors to work on such problems of importance to the field.

The journal's experience has been positive and encouraging in terms of both author submissions and review team reactions. We are on track to achieve our steady-state goals for acceptance and publication at Frontiers. The minor changes to the review process should aid the journal further in reaching these goals and making the process more author-friendly. Overall, we hope the balance we seek to achieve between timeliness and quality assurance at Frontiers will encourage our best scholars to invest in important and timely Frontiers-style papers. As many of us in our field and outside believe, Frontiers is an important initiative to keep the field of quantitative marketing relevant and impactful over the long term.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Variations of these ideas are being contemporaneously and independently implemented across different leading journals and fields, suggesting that the need for such innovation in journals is widespread and across fields. For example, *AER: Insights* is positioned relative to *AER* as "*AER: Insights* is designed to be a top-tier, general-interest economics journal publishing papers of the same

quality and importance as those in the *AER*, but devoted to publishing papers with important insights that can be conveyed succinctly" (American Economic Association 2019). *Management Science* has introduced a Fast Track section to speed up publication in a short article format.

<sup>2</sup>Or here is one with clear attribution to Thoreau, in which he offers comment to a friend on the length of a story: "Not that the story need be long, but it will take a long while to make it short" (Thoreau 1879, p. 165). Letter dated November 16, 1857, to Mr. B. Harrison Blake.

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