Solidarity of Purpose:
Building an Understanding of Consumers
through a Community of Scholars

We are honored to have been given the opportunity to serve as coeditors of the Journal of Consumer Research (JCR) and are inspired by this responsibility. Our overarching goal is to continue to publish the best scholarly research through an editorial process that respects the vision of authors while deploying the talents of a devoted and skilled team of associate editors and reviewers. We are committed to building a coherent understanding of consumers and consumption so that scholars from a broad array of disciplines, marketers, policy makers, and consumers will find value in JCR.

Our aspirations for the journal are very high, because it is already in tremendous shape. We admire the intellectual leadership and approach of John Deighton, who leaves the journal and the field it represents in robust health. We are encouraged by John’s wisdom, generous scholarship, and devoted service to the consumer research community. Thank you, John, for the enduring contribution your stewardship of JCR has given to our field. During John’s term, submissions of new manuscripts to the journal have increased 60%, exceeding 600 in 2010. Total decisions per year have reached 800. Each issue contains high-quality work of substantial value. Further, any editor would envy the community of scholars that the journal comprises. The number of submitting authors is large and drawn from diverse regions and backgrounds. Advising the editors and, in the process, assisting these authors is a correspondingly large, hardworking team of volunteers who serve as associate editors, editorial review board members, and ad hoc reviewers. These referees set out to do what is right for the field and for authors, devoting considerable time to these efforts. They do so because they are dedicated scholars. We also believe they do so because this is a worthwhile field that is still young, with the potential for tremendous future impact.

Consumer research informs daily consumption decisions and practices such as the brands consumers choose and the rituals they enact. This broad class of behaviors is both ubiquitous and sometimes momentous, representing much of the fabric of life. We view these investigations as important endeavors in their own right, and we also see additional significance and longer term consequence in consumer research. We are engaged in understanding the use and allocation of the world’s scarce resources; the well-being of families, communities, and beyond; the profitability and sustainability of enterprises; and the meaning and impact of individual lives, because all these arenas are shaped in large measure by consumer behavior. Hence, while some might consider consumer behavior less important than basic disciplines such as social psychology or anthropology or particular applied fields such as finance or medicine, we disagree with a passion. We have learned much about consumption, but there is so much more to know, and these discoveries will be exciting and important.

Although the field is in robust health, we also see four broad trends that present crucial opportunities and serious challenges for the journal. First, we have grown rapidly, moving from a small, tight band held together by personal bonds and a shared interest to a sprawling field numbering in the thousands. Further, our international community appropriately represents diverse research traditions and interests. Our size and diversity are clear evidence of good health and sources of strength, yet they also raise questions about how to articulate and nurture that which holds us together as a field and a journal. Second, the field of consumer research consists of maturing, highly sophisticated subfields with distinct memberships, source literatures, traditions, and conferences. There is an admirable level of respect and
goodwill across the subfields, suggesting potential for highly productive scholarly conversation. However, we must understand and harness the natural inclination of authors working in maturing subfields to drill down and speak to a narrow audience. Third, improved technology (especially digital publication and search options) allows scholars to limit their exposure to papers of immediate topical interest. Many scholars no longer see individual issues of the journal, nor do they read across paradigms, despite the potential for these papers to shape their ideas. We lament this trend, especially in light of our agreement with the assertion of Owen J. Gingerich, historian of science at Harvard, “Most of the really great breakthroughs in science are unifications” (Chang 2011). Fourth, the growth in membership of the consumer research community coupled with maturing subfields raises the possibility that the field is speaking primarily to itself using codified terms and procedures. The risk is that we create important research but present it in a way that obscures its relevance to a broad community of readers. These four trends present real challenges for a journal that is inherently interdisciplinary (drawing from subfields to produce an integrated contribution) and aims to have an impact on the real world (e.g., marketers, policy makers, consumers), basic disciplines (e.g., sociology, anthropology, economics, psychology), and other focused areas of research (e.g., health, nutrition, finance). Our approach therefore will be to maintain the strengths of the journal (we don’t anticipate any major changes in values or process) while rising to the challenges carried by these broad trends. This approach manifests itself in a proposed compact with the field: what we promise as editors and what we ask of contributors.

WHAT WE PROMISE

Below, we outline our planned process and goals. For further details about the journal, please see the Web site at http://ejcr.org/.

Consistency in Editorial Approach

As coeditors, we are aligned in our aspirations, values, and standards as reflected in this editorial and beyond. Although we will work independently day to day, our overall approach will be one of a shared vision and consistency of action and application.

Broad Expertise and Procedural Justice

No potential author should feel advantaged or disadvantaged on the basis of subfield or core discipline. To support this goal, we have selected a first-rate team of associate editors to provide subfield-specific expertise. Plus, if we don’t have it, we can get it. We will turn to guest associate editors and ad hoc reviewers as needed. Procedural justice goes beyond field definitions, and we pledge to be equally welcoming to authors from all ranks, schools, and geographies. We will edit the journal to ensure that all authors get a smart, informed, and fair shake. Submissions will be randomly assigned, via an automated process, to each of us, subject to constraints regarding conflicts of interest and practical needs to manage the relative workload. Through frequent consultation, we will strive to ensure a shared policy and implementation, such that authors’ chances of publication are not materially affected by editor draw. (That said, we understand that authors will sometimes prefer input, and we will do our best to honor preferences for editors if expressed in submission letters.)

High Standards but Many Routes to Achieving Them

Just as we value multiple paradigms, we also believe that papers take many forms in advancing knowledge. Accordingly, we welcome a wide variety of papers, united by their potential for impact. We continue to be open to conceptual papers as well as “effects” papers that will lead to future comparative theory tests, as described in the recent editorial by the previous team of editors (Deighton et al. 2010). We view the desired category of effects-
oriented research as distinct from “clever applications” effects papers, which make use of existing theory in engaging contexts but do not seem likely to stimulate theoretical advances. By contrast, the types of effects that we are interested in publishing are systematic anomalies that challenge established theoretical explanations and predictions and hence open up dialogues for theoretical innovation. This emphasis on uncovering new areas of investigation by showcasing unexpected effects may suggest a new structure for some papers: leading with the findings, explaining the need for new theory to account for them, and then discussing potential theoretical explanations in a more speculative way in the discussion. This openness to publishing effects may even, in rare cases, extend to work that might be termed descriptive, if the facts described have an impact large enough to have implications for theory. Such descriptive work, like all effects papers, should delineate the implications for theory development to achieve the requisite contribution.

In addition, we welcome what we term “bridging research,” investigations that enrich existing theoretical frameworks by identifying new moderators to illuminate a class of behaviors. In some cases, this research may take as its point of departure an important context or class of behavior that has received little study to date, drawing from published theories to initiate the investigation. In other cases, this work may begin with a specific theory, drawing out its implications for a particular aspect of consumer behavior. The standard for publication in these cases encompasses both the provision of novel insights and the potential for refinement or modification of existing theory.

We also encourage programmatic work, which we see as “dispatches from the field.” These papers will be open-ended as researchers explore an important topic over time. Programmatic work naturally builds on itself, and it has the additional advantage of allowing authors’ thinking to mature as they gain familiarity with the nuances of an area. In our view, each dispatch will be held to the normal standard of contribution level, but we will encourage links across papers within a research program and relax any implicit norms that any one paper must be “the final word” to merit publication; instead, a program of work may bridge from effects to theory tests or from one theory test to the next as researchers systematically investigate a context or class of behavior. Fostering a programmatic approach to research encourages authors to take on big questions, while still achieving a pace of publication that aligns with career demands. This support for programmatic work, however, will not involve new procedures for submission or review. An author may not know an initial submission is the first step in a successful program until after publication.

Regardless of form (e.g., effects, paradigmatic, conceptual, review, etc.), all papers in JCR will continue to be held to exacting standards of contribution by offering new insights regarding current knowledge as well as laying strong foundations for future research. It is difficult to distill a “one-size-fits-all” statement or “checklist” to measure sufficient contribution. For instance, some papers that bring known effects to new contexts may be path-breaking, whereas others may not. The desired criterion in these situations is whether the work will make the reader think: does it shift perspectives, suggesting new questions, implications, and hypotheses? We aim to publish papers that generate spirited debates and detailed comments from colleagues when discussed pre-submission. No scholarly community is as well poised as ours to discover, illuminate, and understand consumption-related puzzles. We seek to publish work that builds connections rather than ending conversations, and we believe that a source of power for our field is the many ways to build bridges to knowledge. We cannot say in advance which bridges can or should be built by authors in JCR; this is the collective work of our field.

Support for Interdisciplinary Research

Interdisciplinarity is a foundational principle of JCR and an aspirational goal for our editorship. We believe that a coherent picture of consumers and consumption will emerge when we unite the perspectives and strengths of various subfields that constitute the journal’s
scholarly community. Hence, we seek to steward the premier interdisciplinary journal on consumption rather than serve as an outlet for marketing, anthropology, psychology, and other specific fields. To this end, we will nudge authors and reviewers to keep subfield boundaries fluid, rather than allowing silos to calcify. That said, we understand and will promote the tried and true approaches to theory development, which tend to depth more than breadth of investigation. Emergent forms of consumer behavior (e.g., social networking) often lend themselves to interdisciplinary inquiry and thereby present important opportunities. Further, merging areas (e.g., behavioral economics) and inquiries into specific subtopics (e.g., identity signaling and magical beliefs) cause methodologies and questions to migrate across base disciplines. If conceived or positioned too narrowly, individual inquiries may read as if the researchers are pioneering new areas of inquiry. This approach leads to disengagement among readers well versed in prior investigations and lost opportunities to enrich each other’s work. We seek to avoid such pitfalls by encouraging conversations across research traditions and viewpoints. Specifically, we encourage authors to craft broader and more accessible introductions and general discussions that speak to a diverse readership.

One practical way we will build connections across papers from different paradigms is by assigning one reviewer from “across the aisle” in appropriate situations. Such reviewers will be particularly important on papers that bridge research paradigms or theoretical perspectives. We will ask these reviewers to provide links to related inquiries that are relevant to broadening the introduction or general discussion. They will not be expected to “intrude” on the theory development and empirical support but instead will facilitate the conversation among scholars who may speak in different research dialects with the long-term goal of creating contributions with the highest possible impact. As editors, our implementation of this initiative will focus on bringing out healthy, two-sided discussion across authors and reviewers from distinct paradigms in such a way that authors feel their work is enriched.

The Review Process as a Means of Improving, Not Merely Judging, Papers

Beyond setting out to provide authors with fair and accurate assessments of their contribution, we will also manage a review process that strives to improve papers. We will oversee the process to ensure that requests for revision make sense and that the changes requested are in proper proportion to their potential to advance the literature. But we also plan to manage JCR as a journal where the best gets better. Further, while we cannot publish all submitted papers, as a premier journal our influence extends beyond our pages. A paper submitted to JCR should still benefit from our input even if we don’t ultimately publish it. In all cases, we seek to ensure that authors and their work will be treated with care and respect regardless of a paper’s ultimate disposition.

Respect for Authors’ Ownership of Their Ideas and the Direction of Their Papers

Although we envision an active review process, we intend to implement it guided by the premise that authors ultimately write their own papers. We understand that reviewers’ suggestions may on occasion seem to take a paper in a direction that the authors did not intend, and we seek to minimize this occurrence. In addition, our efforts to encourage effects papers and programmatic papers, which do not offer complete explanations for a phenomenon, will require partnership with reviewers and associate editors to assess submissions on multiple dimensions. One way we will encourage this broader view is by asking authors to specify the intended contribution of the research as a part of the submission shared with the review team. Authors submitting a paper will be asked to specify their key contribution (in three to five sentences): that important kernel of new knowledge, situated against a background of prior research, around which the paper is organized. The contribution statement will indicate how their research advances or refutes existing scholarship in consumer behavior.
We make this request because we desire to assist authors in clearly communicating the advance intended by their work. Further, we ask that reviewers assess the intended contribution and evaluate where each paper is succeeding or falling short of intention. This approach should lead to a more conversational approach between authors and reviewers.

Help Getting Papers Read

What’s the point otherwise? We intend to promote the relevance of our work to researchers both in and outside the consumer behavior field. In this way, we will empower the journal to speak to a broad readership. We wish to elevate the importance of substance and to resist pushing work into such theoretically abstract frames that it becomes inaccessible and esoteric.

We understand that this goal must be pursued with nuance rather than blunt force. JCR is primarily a journal of theoretical advancements, and we will not alter that mission. However, we also understand that excessive interest in theory can seem to divorce the activity of the journal from the topic—consumers and consumption—that it set out to understand. Fortunately, the theoretical papers in the journal are also relevant to multiple practical domains and real-world contexts. The important story is there; we seek to offer authors room to tell it.

We will strive to publish important papers with impact and to allow authors to write papers such that this impact is accessible to readers. To this end, we plan to work with authors to craft titles and abstracts to make them more readily accessible in searches. That said, we also understand that the immediate impact of cutting-edge scholarship may not be, necessarily, obvious. The scientists and engineers who first developed lasers did not, we assume, anticipate pointing them at people’s eyes, thereby improving the vision of thousands of consumers. So long as the work provides new insights into real consumption behavior, our presumption is that the work is of ultimate relevance. We also stress that JCR is a journal about consumers, not a marketing journal. Thus we believe that the potential applications for JCR should reflect the field’s diversity, encompassing for-profit management, not-for-profit endeavors, public policy, health, education, and consumer transformation, for starters.

In addition, we will look for opportunities to enhance the impact of the excellent work we will be privileged to publish. For example, we plan to expand readership by sending PDFs of published articles to reviewers and cited authors. We believe that this simple effort may prime the pump of looking to JCR for important insights. Our authors are doing amazing work with the potential to shape future research and practice, and as more people find it and read it, that full potential will be realized.

WHAT WE ASK OF CONTRIBUTORS

We are authors too, of course, and we understand that a question during any editorial transition is, “OK, so what does this mean for getting my work into the journal?” The list of our aspirations above provides a partial answer, and below we attempt to fill in some of the remaining steps.

Your Best Work

As a premier journal, we hope to receive your very best work. We promise to work hard to deserve your confidence.

Review-Ready Research

Review team efforts provide little opportunity to improve work when papers are submitted prematurely, that is, when the paper’s contribution is not yet clear. In these cases, it is difficult to get enough traction to help the paper to move forward. Many JCR authors do a wonderful job here, revising their manuscripts according to comments from colleagues, talks, and con-
ferences prior to submitting to JCR. We encourage all authors to engage in these pre-submission endeavors with colleagues to maximize chances of success.

Willingness to Work with the Review Team

We ask for your sincere willingness to engage the review process as a conversation. That means willingness to keep an open mind when receiving the decision materials, and making appropriate changes. It also means letting us know if we have it wrong. The journal and the field strive to advance a literature through the cumulative contribution of individual articles. Let’s work together to make your research better through the review process.

Original Scholarship

Present your research in terms of the literature it advances and be sure to include all relevant citations. Please cite a wide range of related literatures, but also be clear about the position your paper occupies in its subfield. At the time of submission, send us your own closely related papers that are currently under review or in press at other journals. These papers are made available to the Editor and Associate Editor assigned to a submission to allow for a complete evaluation of the contribution and to provide a resource should questions arise during review. We seek to publish papers that provide conceptual advances over other published work.

Papers That Speak to the Reader

The real measure of impact is determined long after the review process. We ask you to write in a way that readers can access and remember. Consider the story you would like to tell. Identify the general idea, or gist, you want the reader to remember. As Roger Shank (1990, 115) suggests, “The process of story creation, of condensing an experience into a story-size chunk that can be told in a reasonable amount of time, is a process that makes the chunks smaller and smaller. Subsequent iterations of the same story tend to get smaller in the retelling as more details are forgotten. . . . Normally, after much retelling, we are left with exactly the details of the story that we have chosen to remember. In short, story creation is a memory process. As we tell a story, we are formulating the gist of the experience which we can recall whenever we create a story describing the experience.” We, as authors, create stories as we craft a paper, and readers create stories as they read and decipher the paper. Readers remember the heart or focus of the story. That focus is your unique, important, scholarly contribution.

SUMMARY

Again, we are deeply honored to serve the field as stewards of JCR. We know that this opportunity is a phenomenal one because of you: the dedicated, insightful, and diverse scholarly community of consumer researchers. Thank you, in advance, for your commitment and partnership.

We envision our next three years as a compact: we promise our best efforts, and we ask for yours in return. We will strive to uphold consistent standards, broad acceptance of viewpoints, and a fair process for all. We also seek to welcome a variety of routes to contribution, including but not limited to interdisciplinary breakthroughs. We endeavor to oversee a process that makes every submitted manuscript better while simultaneously respecting your ownership of your ideas. Finally, led by our Managing Editor and media maven, Mary-Ann Twist, we will try our best to continue getting the word out regarding the wonderful scholarship in our pages through JCR’s well-received media outreach program, which has made our work accessible to a broad audience of nonacademics. We hope you—our authors and potential authors—will send in your best work when it is ready for review. We hope
you will embrace the opportunity to engage in a conversation with the review team and
that you will ultimately produce papers that tell your story in a way that a diversity of
readers will appreciate. We believe that if we, as a field, can accomplish this, we will maximize
the opportunity inherent in the journal while mitigating the challenges. We are all fortunate
to be partners in a collaborative scholarly community characterized by much prior success
as well as sharing great opportunities for future discovery.

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