

IRWIN AWARD SPEECH

Thank you, Bart. I am truly thrilled to receive this career award, and am grateful to the committee, to AMA, and to Irwin/McGraw Hill. I have attended many Irwin Award speeches, and know that it is customary for recipients to highlight their past work in their talk. I am not going to do that. My research is in the public domain and I rather tell you some things you don't know about my career.

My research has taken place in a rich network of colleagues, friends, mentors, staff, and students—all relationships that were crucial to my being here today. I want to tell you about these relationships and their roles in shaping my career.

I discovered my academic passion when I was fifteen years old. I was a lifeguard hired to teach small children to swim at the local YMCA. My boss, Lou Hammond, was huge and frightening, but not clear to me about what my job involved. All I knew for sure was that I shouldn't let people drown, what we service researchers call the outcome component of service quality. I was curious about the process components. The roots of SERVQUAL were planted in that lifeguard chair as I tried to figure out what Lou, the children, and their parents—all my customers--expected.

Hmm. Act like I know what I'm doing. Be friendly and confident. Learn the children's names. When a parent complains, listen attentively, reassure her, and act quickly. Many of you will recognize these as precursors to SERVQUAL attributes.

To pay my way through school, I held many other service jobs--busgirl, babysitter, cafeteria worker, clerk, camp counselor, typist, and secretary. When I graduated from college with a degree in psychology, the only job available without an advanced degree was also a service job: parole officer. I decided to pass on that one.

Instead, I pounded the streets of Baltimore and chanced into advertising. I was fortunate to work in a medium-sized 4A agency where I was able to convince people to give me the chance to buy media, write advertising copy, do production, and accompany the "suits" or client representatives to meetings. With a bit of luck and hard work, I become a "suit" myself. My clients included two goods and seven service companies. The goods companies were straightforward to market and advertise. Marketing the services was harder but I didn't understand why or how.

I went to Maryland for an MBA in search of answers. Unfortunately, the textbooks and courses at the time used only beer, cars, durable goods, and

packaged goods as examples. I decided to stay at Maryland for a PhD to read the academic journals, learn what I could, and write a dissertation on the topic.

My doctoral committee vetoed that idea because in their minds major journals would not accept papers on services, as services were viewed as "just a context." So I wrote and published my dissertation on price environments in supermarkets. As soon as I got to my first academic job, I was immediately drawn back to services marketing. I had the good fortune to be in the right place, Texas A&M, at the right time, the early 80s, with the right people, Len Berry and Parsu Parasuraman. A little known-fact about our collaboration is that Parsu was not a service researcher when we met but was gracious and willing to work with me. A second little-known fact is that Parsu and I bribed Len to come to A&M on the promise that the three of us would work together if he took the offer.

The renegade band of service researchers began to assemble at that time. In 1981, AMA sponsored the first Services Marketing Conference where a group of executives and academics from all over the world came together. We raised questions about and sought answers to what we believed were critical services questions. That group — many of whom are in this room today — was responsible for developing the sub-field. Ask these researchers, and their academic

descendents, and they will tell you that we were s supportive and encouraging community.

Most academics develop a philosophy of research over time. I strongly believe—as I'm sure you all do—that research must be solidly grounded in theory, literature, and hard evidence. But right from the beginnings in that lifeguard chair, it was also important to me to be relevant. I wanted to know what executives and managers knew, and found them an inspiration for research ideas, refinement in my thinking, and irreplaceable sources of feedback. In turn, communicating to business audiences helped me learn to translate my academic thinking into understandable concepts for the classroom.

I view research as a jigsaw puzzle. No one has all the puzzle pieces...customers have some, executives others, academics yet others. Behavioral researchers have some pieces, as do modelers. What I like to do best is to create the edges of the puzzle—the conceptual framework—and then work and rework all the inside pieces until they it fit together. If the edges are solid, the inside pieces can be continuously reconfigured as we learn more. I don't worry that others will pre-empt my research because I learn what I can from them and incorporate their pieces into the puzzle. The PZB Gaps Model is an example of such a puzzle that was first published in 1982 but that has morphed over time.

I believe strongly in RIGOR and RELEVANCE. Thank goodness the Marketing Science Institute, its staff, academics, and company members thought of this combination a long time ago. MSI generously sponsored, published and supported 14 research studies in my career, including the complete set of SERVQUAL and Gap Model studies. When Len, Parsu and I published our academic book for business in 1990, we dedicated it to MSI, saying that MSI was a “one of a kind GEM of an organization.” I can’t say enough about how valuable MSI is to our field. And MSI’s view of the world—connecting academia and practice with rigor, relevance, and readability—meshed perfectly with my own.

Enough about philosophy.

I’ve been fortunate to have developed an academic family where the bonds go far beyond work. I value my three academic homes of Maryland, Texas A&M and UNC at Chapel Hill. I value the colleagues with whom I’ve collaborated and my mentors who have guided me through.

I’m also grateful for the enduring friendships I’ve made in this profession. Some of them have moved on to other pursuits, some dress a bit differently today than they did in the past. Each has taught me many intellectual and practical lessons but—just as important—I’ve had many good times with them.

I especially want to thank my enduring friends who have shared my enthusiasm for dancing, whether it was Texas "kicker" dancing, disco, or swing dancing. BY THE WAY, I HAVE VIDEO.

I have a few special SHOUT OUTS before I close.

First, to my baby son Brian who was born while I was in the doctoral program? He is here today and I hope you will make an effort to meet him and the rest of my family.

Second, to an MBA student who came into my life at the second AMA services marketing conference? This student contacted me and asked me to have breakfast with her. She didn't have a PhD; she wasn't even in a PhD program at the time. That student was Mary Jo Bitner, with whom I have collaborated on papers, conferences and--most important to me--our McGraw-Hill textbook on services marketing. My favorite story about our first edition is how we wrote the proposal. We were standing in a swimming pool in Mesa, Arizona because it was too hot to do it anywhere else. Writing a textbook has its challenges but it has more rewards than challenges. Because we wrote the first fully integrated text, incorporating academic research and practice, we could be creative and pull together everything we knew in the emerging field. We framed the text, now in its fifth edition,

around the *Gaps Model*. It has been published legally and illegally all over the world. Who would have thought I'd learn to write in so many languages? Mary Jo is also my friend and I'm proud of her work in making Arizona State's Service Leadership Center the best in the country.

Mary Gilly, Denise Smart and I started our careers together at Texas A&M almost three decades ago. We began as colleagues, writing papers, sharing teaching ideas, and discussing ways that we could run the marketing area better than those in charge. Over the decades, we watched each other's children grow, became sounding boards on everything from achieving balance in life to which shoes went best with which outfit. I am proud to know them as successful academics. Each has been a leader in AMA holding the position of President of the Academic Council. Denise is one of the most successful deans in the country and Mary continues to amaze me as she contributes to the literature and to the growth of her doctoral students. Most important is that they are my dearest friends in the world.

Parsu Parasuraman has had, more than any other individual, the biggest impact on my career. It's not just because he is brilliant and hardworking, which he is. It's not just because he is the researcher who created our brand name, PZB, which he was. It is also because he is kind, supportive, generous, witty, sensitive,

fun, and even protective when necessary. I don't have a brother, but if I did, I'd choose Parsu. He truly should be standing up here to receive this award with me today.

Oh...there's one more thing about MSI. For 20 years, I read papers on price and perceived quality from a European author that I had never met. In fact, we didn't come face to face until the 21st century when MSI appointed us Academic Trustees the same year. The first time this author sat down beside me at an MSI Trustees Dinner, I thought he was a doctoral student from Wharton. We talked about research, female shopping behavior, children, and ADHD. Over time, we became friends, then colleagues, then fiancées, then spouses, and then soul mates.

In closing, I am thrilled to have spent my career as a marketing academic. In what other job could I study exactly what I wanted with wonderful colleagues, and still find compelling challenges three decades later?

I wake up every day grateful to have a job, especially in this economy.

Thank you all for what you did to make my career so worthwhile.