

How to Select the Best Product

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Assume that you were interested in selecting a high-quality product from a number of competing products. Your trade association stipulates that brand names must be removed from the competing products before they are shipped to you. That rule seems odd as the quality of this product is difficult to judge and you depend on brand names as a way to gauge quality. When you ask about the rule, they say that it will help you select a high-quality product. They also say it is fair to new producers, who otherwise would be unable to compete.

I imagine some marketing professors would take exception to such a market. Yet, recently, I have been reading exchanges on ELMAR about blind reviewing for papers submitted to academic meetings. Blind reviewing of papers is like removing brand names from products. Is it effective?

As it turns out, the evidence does not support blind review. This evidence, consisting of six studies, is summarized in my 1997 paper, "Peer Review for Journals: Evidence on Quality Control, Fairness, and Innovation," *Science and Engineering Ethics*, 3, 63-84 (available in full-text at <http://www.jscottarmstrong.com>). My conclusion was that blind reviewing is harmful to quality and to innovation. Why to innovation? Because reviewers' often reject papers when they do not agree with the paper's findings. Reviewers might be less apt to reject new findings from well-respected researchers.

In addition, there is little evidence that blind reviewing aids fairness, and even if there was, fairness is the enemy of innovation. My forthcoming paper shows that, on average, an invited or special-treatment paper has about 20 times more impact than a paper that passed through traditional "fairer" journal reviewing procedures. They are also less expensive to process. (See "Reaping Benefits from Management Research," *Interfaces*, forthcoming, at the above-mentioned site.)

One study concluded that to publish papers that will be frequently cited, journals should publish papers by frequently cited authors. Researchers devote much effort to establishing their names. Authors' names, like brand names, communicate useful information.

There is a simple solution that does not require a change in the way journals and conferences operate. That is, reviewers should not make a recommendation about whether a paper should be published. They should only make suggestions on how to improve the paper. (The editor, who knows the author's name, would decide whether to publish the paper.) I have been using this procedure in all of my reviewing since 1997. I invite you to do so as well.

On a related matter, is it worthwhile to review papers for conferences? Why not allow free speech where there is no constraint on space?