

## **Students' Views of the Marketing Internship: Benefits, Drawbacks, and Surprises**

Curt J. Dommeyer, Barbara L. Gross, and David S. Ackerman,  
California State University, Northridge

### **Abstract**

Internships are a staple of many undergraduate marketing programs. Internship experiences provide students with opportunities for hands-on learning and can help to bridge the gap between the classroom and students' futures as marketing professionals. Through internships, students work in professional environments, learn from practitioners, observe real marketing situations, practice and develop marketing skills, and possibly witness the development and implementation of marketing strategies. Further, internships can help students to identify a focus of professional interest and to be more employable upon graduation.

In this study, students who had fulfilled a marketing internship (n=279) completed a comprehensive questionnaire about their internship experiences, including what they liked and disliked, surprises, problems, and suggestions. Students also responded to 50 belief statements concerning their experiences during the internship, and attitude scales were developed (e.g., Perceived Learning Scale, Uncomfortable Scale). Although some of the internship literature indicates that employers may take advantage of students for free labor, our results showed that most students found their internship to be a rewarding and educational experience. Selected findings are summarized below.

The interns in our study worked for employers in a wide variety of industries and most employers were small. Thirty-six percent worked as an administrative assistant and did anything from mundane to more challenging duties such as composing correspondence, constructing spending and sales reports, developing press releases, and assisting in implementing special events. Thirty percent worked in the field of social media marketing and were involved in website design, search engine optimization, and/or search engine marketing. Fifteen percent were engaged in sales-related tasks such as compiling prospective client lists and making sales calls. Thirteen percent developed and implemented marketing strategies, including SWOT analysis, marketing plans, and advertising campaigns. Sixty-six percent of the interns worked on at least one major project during their internship. The most prevalent projects involved social media marketing, followed by developing and/or running a major event. Some interns developed and/or worked on a major advertising or sales campaign.

The results of the study generally shed a favorable light on marketing internships. The average score for all respondents on the Perceived Learning Scale was 4.07 out of a possible 5, revealing that the students perceived their internship to provide a meaningful learning experience. When asked what surprised them most about their internship, 40% stated that they were surprised by how much they learned. The respondents' low average score on the Uncomfortable Scale (1.87 out of 5) reveals that most interns were not uncomfortable in their roles. When students were asked to explain the problems they had during their internship, 55% stated that they did not have any problems.

Nearly all respondents (97%) indicated that they found the internship to be a learning experience, with the most commonly mentioned areas of learning pertaining to, "how the business was run" (21%), "communication skills" (18%), "social media marketing strategies" (10%), "people skills" (6%), "professional behavior" (5%), "time management" (5%), "understanding customers' needs" (5%), and "the importance of a strong work ethic" (5%). The most prevalent benefits mentioned were, "learning about the business" (27%) and "getting real work experience" (17%). When asked what they liked most about their internship, the students indicated, "the people" (20%), "getting real work experience" (17%), "learning how the business was run" (12%), and "the tasks assigned" (11%). When asked if an internship course should be required of all marketing students, only nine percent felt that it should not be required.

When asked about the problems they had with their internship, the majority (55%) stated that they had no problems. Similarly, 44% indicated, when asked how the employer could have improved the internship, that no improvement was necessary. In order of frequency, interns who felt there were problems indicated that they were overwhelmed by the work that was given to them (11%); that they needed more formal, on-the-job training to properly execute their duties (10%); or that they had a communication problem with either their supervisor, co-workers, or customers (6%). Surprisingly, less than one percent complained about the fact that they were not paid for their work. When asked about what they liked least about their internships, about 15% of the interns echoed the most frequent response to the previous question by stating, in essence, “nothing – all was good.” Of those who did list complaints, 15% complained about being assigned menial, dull tasks that did not showcase their talents. Fewer numbers referred to the lack of pay (6%), and not being given enough guidance (4%).

Several factors enhanced the students’ learning. Most of the interns (77%) had not previously worked in a marketing position. They were exposed for the first time to the practical side of marketing as contrasted with the theory they received in the classroom. Moreover, many were supervised by a senior officer of a small company, which provided them with considerable exposure to how a business is run. Our research suggests that marketing departments should do everything possible to enhance the learning opportunities of internships.