

THE USE OF ACADEMIC MARKETING ARTICLES IN THE
MARKETING RESEARCH COURSE: RATIONALES AND REACTIONS

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ABSTRACT

The authors describe how the intimidation surrounding the reading of articles in academic marketing journals can be lessened for undergraduate students in the marketing research class. By choosing one relevant article and devoting the entire semester to the discussion of the research principles and data analysis described in it, students should not be so reluctant to pursue other academic articles in the future. This paper describes the related pedagogical technique used in the marketing research class, the rationale for it, and what the student reactions are to the process.

INTRODUCTION

Chapters covering the use of secondary information in marketing research texts usually mention the top journals in the field (i.e., Journal of Marketing and Journal of Marketing Research) as important sources of information. However, when attempting to compile library sources for a research project, students tend to shy away from these journals because they are "too theoretical" or "too difficult to understand (Clark and Geisler 1986). They will be much more likely to pursue articles appearing in Advertising Age, The Wall Street Journal, and Sales and Marketing Management than other more academic publications. Many times, outside reading assignments are necessary to force students to obtain experience with the feared journals.

The purpose of this article is to describe how using one well-chosen article from the marketing literature can serve several teaching purposes in the marketing research class. Also, student reactions to such a classroom technique are explored. It was thought that by concentrating on one major research-oriented academic article throughout the entire semester of a research course, the students would have more than sufficient time to understand the principles described in that article. Maybe then, they will not adopt such a negative view of the research course, which is often the case when high levels of effort must be exerted to understand required readings (Razek and Cone 1981). Also, since empirical articles present findings and statistical results, these topics can be covered at length while exploring the application of statistical techniques during the semester. The use of the major article also allows students to review an example of what is considered to be fairly good research by members of the marketing community. If the teaching article is chosen well, a wide range of research topics can be covered by allowing the article to serve as a focal point. Topics such as the necessity for a

thorough secondary search, formulating research objectives, choosing a sample, exploratory research, pretesting, administering a survey, and the reporting of findings are all covered in a good empirical piece. If an article can be found that describes how a summed index was constructed, then the students are able to obtain additional information about the research process. A good journal article serves as a nice supplement to the traditional research text.

From an instructor's point of view, the optimal article would address all of the above mentioned stages of a research project. For the chosen article to be relevant to the learning process, however, the article must be of interest to the students. An article exploring consumers' reactions to general marketing practices (e.g., sex roles in advertising) would be of more interest than one exploring the relationships among channel members. Also, the article must make use of statistical analysis of which the students are familiar.

Most statistics students admit that they quickly forget the material they learned after the semester is over. It is very unlikely that they will remember the intricacies of analysis of variance or regression when reading an article that makes use of these techniques. However, it is important that they at least recognize that at one time they did know a little about the procedures that are mentioned in the article. Therefore, an article which makes quite extensive use of LISREL or say, conjoint analysis, will probably not aid in the students' learning process. On the other hand, exposing the students to one or two new but less complex procedures or techniques with which they might not be familiar could expand their knowledge of statistical applications in a marketing research environment.

An additional nicety would be that the authors of the article have included a copy of the instrument they used to collect data. The copy of the survey serves as a helpful learning device in several ways. Students can critically evaluate the format and makeup of the items that appear on the survey. Also, copies of the instrument are made and students are asked to respond to the survey themselves. Afterwards, the student responses are entered into a data base and are subjected to data analysis assignments for the remainder of the semester. The idea here is that students would rather run assignments on data they themselves generated than on some data base that they had no role in creating. Comparisons can be made between the responses generated by the students and the findings reported in the article with the students attempting to explain any discrepancies.

SUGGESTED ARTICLES

One recent article that has been used successfully in the marketing research class as a semester focus is by Gaski and Etzel (1986). The article explores the American public's feelings of consumer sentiment toward marketing practices. The scale construction stage of their instrument is discussed, along with reliability and validity properties of their measure. This discussion complements the sections of chapters in most research texts on the necessity of instrument validity. The Gaski and Etzel article discusses Cronbach's alpha, a technique which is certainly important in validity discussions, but rarely presented to the typical undergraduate student.

The article also engages in a thorough discussion of how to score and sum their Likert measure. Therefore, all the students have to do is carefully follow instructions contained in the article and they should be able to calculate their own "consumer sentiment" score. Most of the statistical analysis is very straight forward and should be familiar to the students. The authors discuss their findings in terms of means, correlations, and t-tests.

A point should be made that it is not very easy to find an appropriate article from the literature to use in the research class. One wants an article which is "meaty" enough without being overbearing. Presumably, the professor would want to use a publication from the last few years, so the number of potential articles to use is strictly limited.

As many professors can envision, most Journal of Marketing Research and Journal of Marketing articles would not be appropriate for undergraduates to read. If one is having difficulty finding relevant journals in these "top tier" publications in our discipline, then perhaps articles from the Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science should be considered. While concentrating on sound empirical works, the articles here do not appear to be so intimidating to students.

Ezell and Russell's (1985) "Single and Multiple Person Household Shoppers: A Focus on Grocery Store Selection Criteria and Grocery Shopping Attitudes and Behavior," was selected as an alternative article to use for the marketing research class. The article was chosen because it describes many aspects of the research process. The topic is general and interesting enough for any marketing student. Also, the authors used various statistics techniques such as t-tests and chi-square analysis for the study. The marketing research students should be fairly familiar with these techniques already and be able to understand the study. Finally, the article includes the actual survey, to which the students can respond and use in learning the applications of statistical techniques.

ADMINISTRATION SUGGESTIONS

Perhaps the ideal way of beginning this project is to have a copy of the instrument taken from

the chosen article available for students to complete the first day of class. In addition to the instrument, questions such as age, previous computer and statistical experience, and a self analysis of skills considered important to the research process can be included. This survey is an ideal way of obtaining practical information such as a student's address and phone number.

From the start, students should be informed of the purpose of the survey. We have found that the students tend to take the project seriously if they know they are generating data that they will be working with later in the semester. Therefore, the article can serve as a discussion framework for the part of the semester covering secondary research, writing of questions, choosing samples, and writing reports. Next, the students use a statistical analysis package to produce frequency tables and conduct hypothesis testing based on their own data, and they interpret all computer findings. Then, at the end of the semester, they are to describe why their findings may differ from those of the authors of the article and from previous semesters of students in marketing research classes.

CLASS CONSUMER SENTIMENT FINDINGS

The following is a description of the findings obtained by two semesters of marketing research students concerning the results generated from their data, a comparison to the article by Gaski and Etzel, and a summary of their reactions to the process.

Gaski and Etzel report a possible range of consumer sentiment scores of 200 to +200. They found a mean of -14.85. The mean consumer sentiment scores for two semesters of marketing research are +23.91 and +27.07. The positive mean scores, which are significantly different from a neutral score of 0 in both cases, reflect that the students have positive attitudes toward marketing. Since most of the students in the marketing research class are either majors or are interested in marketing, it is not surprising to obtain such high mean scores. Students are usually interested in whether there are relationships between consumer sentiment and age or one's GPA. While usually not significant, these possible relationships serve as exercises to demonstrate the correlation commands in the adopted statistical software package.

Also, consumer sentiment scores are correlated with the "marketing in general," "satisfaction," and "how infrequently consumers have problems" sections as used by Gaski and Etzel to establish convergent validity. As in the Gaski and Etzel article, consumer sentiment is significantly correlated with all alternate measures of feelings about marketing.

Comparison to Gaski and Etzel's (1986) Findings

The Gaski and Etzel results and the classroom survey results differ in three ways. First, their consumer sentiment mean score is negative

while students' mean sentiment scores are positive. The difference is easily attributed to the difference in samples as discussed earlier. The research class students are favorably disposed toward marketing compared to general consumers. As a result, the classroom surveys have high positive mean scores in consumer sentiment.

In addition, Gaski and Etzel's study shows that male and female respondents have significantly different attitudes toward marketing. However, in our classroom survey, a t-test revealed that there are no significant differences between male and female students regarding consumer sentiment scores.

Finally, Gaski and Etzel have stated that consumer sentiment toward marketing has improved in recent years. Although there is an increase in the sentiment scores for the most recent semester's class, there are no significant differences between the two classes; and we do not have sufficient data to support the trend of attitude improvement. Future surveys in the marketing research classes are needed for further analysis.

Student Reactions

How did the students like the idea of using an academic journal article as supplementary material for a class? Students' responses were mostly positive. The consumer sentiment article gave students a larger picture of what marketing research is all about. Students obtained knowledge of the whole process of survey research including designing, implementing, analyzing, and evaluating an actual survey.

Due to the increased use of market surveys, it is very possible that students have been asked to fill out surveys before. Being survey subjects, students may find themselves very concerned about how others evaluate their responses or may feel frustrated because they are being "studied" by someone. The fact that students can actually fill out the consumer sentiment survey at the beginning of the semester and then analyze the results provides students an opportunity to look at the study from two standpoints, as a subject and as a researcher. Students then are more knowledgeable about both the respondent and the researcher's role in the research process.

Not only does the article provide a chance for students to discover how they feel about marketing, it also provides information about general customers' attitudes toward marketing in the United States. Knowing how U.S. customers feel about product quality, product price, advertising, retailing, and marketing in general, students will be able to identify, analyze and solve marketing problems when they enter the business world and begin their marketing careers.

The major frustration students had about the article was from the "unfamiliar" marketing and statistics terms. Although students were required to have statistics classes before they could take the research class, they might have taken them a couple of years earlier and for-

gotten most of the statistical techniques and terms. Also, many statistical terms such as "coefficient alpha" which are familiar to academic researchers are not covered in most beginning statistics books. The frustration may be reduced if the students are assigned readings which review certain statistical techniques before the article is presented to them.

SUMMARY AND LIMITATIONS

Using one academic marketing journal article as an example of how to formulate and implement a market research project provides a number of benefits. First, students usually will not approach an academic journal because it is considered to be difficult to read and understand. When only one article is used in a semester, students can devote more time to understanding the article in depth, and may be less intimidated with reading academic journals. Second, the article presents the materials from which the students can find out what they can expect to learn from the marketing research class. Finally, the article provides an overall picture of marketing research.

However, educators should not neglect the limitations of implementing the proposed method. The fact that only one article is being used creates several problems. Students do not gain exposure to a variety of research studies where different methodologies are used. Although having an entire semester to discuss the chosen article is beneficial, an additional suggestion is that students be given one academic and one business consulting report to enhance their learning. Then they would receive a broader view of both the academic and practitioner worlds.

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