

TEACHING UNDERGRADUATE CONSUMER BEHAVIOR:
A PRACTICAL APPROACH

Suzanne Douglas
Department of Marketing
California State University, Fullerton

A problem inherent in the teaching of consumer behavior is the pupil's rejection of theories applicable to the purchase decision process as being too psychologically based and lacking in substance for application. Having learned the value of facts and figures, the student of the School of Business tends to have little faith in the ability of qualitative research to produce relevant data. He thus runs the danger of oversimplifying the task of identifying consumer's desires, motives, opinions, perceptions and attitudes.

In an effort to solve this problem while underscoring the importance of the basic tenants of consumer behavior the following experiment was undertaken.

The first eleven weeks of the semester were couched in a traditional framework. Required textbook reading was complemented by lectures and short case presentations. Two examinations composed of "objective" and "short answer" questions measured the student's understanding.

A project was conceived to reinforce textbook theory and accomplish these additional goals:

- *aid the student in recognizing the practical value of relevant theories.
- *provide repeated opportunities to act as a practitioner in evaluating results of qualitative research and make meaningful statements regarding consumer attitudes/perceptions/behavior/use, etc., vis-a-vis particular offerings.
- *give the instructor a vehicle for evaluating each student on his ability to approach a "consumer behavior" problem.
- *allow the instructor to measure the student's ability to apply theory rather than memorize it.

Eight topics were circulated in class with instructions for five students to work on a topic. An initial meeting was held by each group to more closely define the topic and break it into workable units (i.e. age, sex, etc.). From this point on the projects were to be an individual effort resulting in collection of primary data from 10 respondents, a written report and oral discussion of findings.

The unique twist in this experiment is the combining of individual effort of "term paper" intensity with continued class involvement. With the

benefit of collective findings now consisting of responses from 50 people, each class member was to turn in a one-page summary of his conclusions of each group report at the next meeting. This requirement insured maximum attendance and participation in discussion as well as continued practice in theory application.

At the end of the Fall 1980 semester students in two classes were asked to respond orally and in writing to questions regarding this method. Drawing on those responses the following observations can be made:

This approach resulted in raising the status of the Consumer Behavior course. Direct involvement in research and application elicited respect for the place of such work in the business world.

It is clear that the necessity to write a summary after each panel discussion resulted in greater attention to the understanding of text and lecture presentations.

In a survey of which topics were most interesting computers and home entertainment were rated highest followed closely by Designer Jeans and National versus House Brands. On top of the list of suggestions for future topics were "Products important for the future" and "Attitudes regarding a current fad or trend."