

## AN INTERNATIONAL INTERNET ASSIGNMENT FOR PRINCIPLES OF MARKETING

Robert Zimmer and Scott Greene  
Marketing Department, California State University, Fullerton, CA 92834  
[zimmer@fullerton.edu](mailto:zimmer@fullerton.edu); [sgreene@fullerton.edu](mailto:sgreene@fullerton.edu)

### ABSTRACT

Marketing educators have been clamoring for the introductory marketing course to contain Internet-based assignments for accessing and retrieving marketing information, as a means for internationalizing the course. This paper presents a global Internet research assignment. It requires students to scan the globe in order to select a country in which they would like to work or to start their own business after graduating college.

During the past five years, the globalization of markets has been accelerating due to the proliferation of companies using the Internet to market their products and services to previously untapped potential customers around the world. Global markets and information technology are interdependent forces, which are forcing companies to think globally in formulating their growth strategies. The long-term projections for both electronic business-to-business and consumer commerce are phenomenal, as reflected in investors' insatiable appetite for technology-related equities.

In light of this dramatically changing business landscape, these two forces are reshaping the way in which marketing education should be taught (Lamont & Friedman, 1997). As we prepare students to enter the new millennium, they will need to acquire a global business perspective, and to possess facileness in conducting business over the Internet (Atwong & Hugstad, 1997; Holmes & Clizbe, 1997). The purpose of this paper is to:

1. proffer a global Internet research assignment for use in the introductory marketing course, and
2. present some preliminary findings from the pretest of a student questionnaire, which was designed to assess the value of the assignment in helping students gain a global perspective and improve their international Internet research skills.

### Approaches to Internationalizing Business School Curricula

To incorporate an international dimension into business school curricula, various approaches, which require different levels of commitment by schools and their faculty, are available. The most dramatic approach would be to add an "Introduction to International Business" course to the core, and to offer an "International Global Strategy" course, in lieu of, or in addition to, the traditional capstone strategy course. This approach also requires the development of courses for each of the functional areas, such as international production, international finance, international marketing, etc. As part of this development process, international databases, simulations, and expert systems designed for teaching an international marketing course are gaining acceptance (Priovolos, 1993; Karakaya, 1993). In essence, an entire new international department is created alongside the other traditional departments in business schools. There is strong support for tailoring academic programs by merely adding international-functional courses, rather than creating new departments (Serey, Lindsay & Myers, 1989; Aggarwal, 1989).

A second approach to internationalizing business school curricula would be to require that the global dimension be integrated into all business courses. Larson (1991) argues that international topics must not be covered in isolated courses, but instead they must pervade the entire business curriculum. Faculty-wide integration of the global dimension into every business course may be difficult and impractical to attain because it requires accompanying voluntary change on the part of faculty members (Fleming, Shooshtari & Wallwork, 1993). Nonetheless, this is the most popular approach, with marketing being the most internationalized, functional business discipline.

Two other approaches for incorporating a global dimension into business school curricula require students to (1) take international courses outside the school of business and (2) go on foreign study tours. Students take either language and intercultural communication courses, or they take comparative or international courses in relevant

social sciences such as anthropology, economics, sociology, etc. (Ivancevich & Duening, 1993). Foreign study tours provide an opportunity to infuse the global dimension into a business course by actually taking the class into the international marketplace, thus providing foreign country exposure to both students and instructors. As part of study-tour programs, lectures are supplemented with guest speakers, class field trips, student projects, and foreign study tours (Gibbs 1994; Kashiak & Jones, 1996).

A final approach—still in relative infancy—involves the use of the Internet and World Wide Web to integrate a global dimension into the curricula. According to Lamont & Friedman (1997), information technology is the most significant force driving change and shaping the future of marketing education. What makes the Internet technology uniquely attractive are three features:

1. Interconnectivity – provides flexible linkages to information sources around the world.
2. Anywhere, Anytime – efficient global access to information sources across geographical boundaries and time zones.
3. Dynamic Multimedia for formatting, presenting or interacting with information (Atwong & Hugstad, 1997).

Consequently, educators are starting to realize the potential that information technology has for enhancing students' learning of international business (Lundstrom & White, 1997; Stull, Bartkus & Richards, 1996).

### **Obstacles to Internationalizing Business School Curricula**

Despite the pressing need to globalize business curricula, three major—but not insurmountable—obstacles hinder the process: (1) many professors lack international business knowledge (formal or experiential); (2) many instructors resist change, and cite the absence of incentive systems to reward their teaching and research in international topics; and (3) students are not interested in international business careers.

In the past several years, the apparent lack of international knowledge of most instructors has received considerable attention (Zimmer, Bruce & Lange, 1996; Tilley, Cudd & Rutledge, 1994). Adding to the problem in marketing is the apparent gap that exists between instructors who want international

business students to have more computer proficiency and negotiation skills, and professional marketers who see the need for more communication skills and cultural-sensitivity training for students (Lundstrom & White, 1997; Lundstrom, White & Schuster, 1996).

The second obstacle to internationalizing instruction is organizational inertia and inherent resistance to change by faculty, department chairs, deans, and other top administrators of universities. The most challenging task may be motivating faculty to embrace curriculum change (Lamont & Friedman, 1997). Also, rivalries for resources between schools and interdepartmental politics can hinder university progress in affecting real curriculum change. Additionally, the limitations of current reward systems, including pay increases, promotion, and tenure, tend to demotivate faculty from investing the time to acquire international knowledge (White & Whitener, 1998; Keating & Byles, 1991). Smuckler and Sommers (1998) posit that curriculum change can be a twenty-year incremental process.

The final obstacle appears to be students' disinterest in international business careers. Results from two studies of undergraduate business school students indicate that a lack of student interest may be a major deterrent to internationalizing business curricula (Tillery, Cudd & Rutledge, 1994; Neubaum, Burden & Bryan, 1997). A possible explanation for this low interest is that only 27% of students surveyed felt that they were well prepared to work in the international business area (Shannon, Turley & Miller, 1996).

### **Internationalizing the Introductory Marketing Course by Using Global Internet Assignments**

In recent years, research attention has been directed at internationalizing the introductory marketing course (Lamont & Friedman, 1997; Johnson & Mader, 1992). One study focused on examining the extent of classroom coverage and the teaching materials used by instructors to cover international topics in the introductory marketing course (Zimmer, Bruce & Lange, 1996). It appears that marketing instructors are sensitive to the need for placing greater emphasis on more rigorous teaching of international marketing. In a survey

of over 400 marketing educators, Jarboe, McDaniel and Lamb (1989) found that classroom coverage of international marketing averaged 1.54 hours, and it would have been increased to 3.72 hours (a gain of 142.3%) if student contact hours were doubled from 45 to 90.

Marketing educators are starting to embrace the Internet, as an invaluable tool for internationalizing the curriculum. Siegel (1996) reported having students in an international marketing course complete a "country book" assignment solely on the Internet. Other educators also have international marketing students conduct Internet searches on a foreign country (Atwong, Lange, Doak & Aijo, 1996). After completing a market research project, students formed cross-national teams with foreign students in their targeted countries. They were required to collaborate and to communicate with their teammates using available technology.

Our assignment for the introductory marketing course involves having students scan the globe, in order to select a country in which they would like to work or to start their own business. Students are required to use the Internet to research their targeted countries. The assignment answers marketing educators who have been clamoring for the introductory marketing course to contain Internet-based assignments for accessing and retrieving marketing information, as a means of internationalizing the course (Siegel, 1996; Lamont & Friedman, 1997 and Atwong & Hugstad, 1997).

Exhibit I presents the two-page form provided to students for recording their information. The primary student learning objectives of this assignment were fourfold:

1. to have students study and learn about the demographics, culture, economy, political system, and geography of a foreign country
2. to familiarize and upgrade student global research and information retrieval skills using the Internet
3. to apply segmentation, targeting and other marketing concepts to the global marketplace
4. to upgrade students' report writing skills.

#### **Administering the Global Internet Search Assignment**

The first and most important step is to sell students repeatedly on the benefits of

investing their time on this assignment. The "selling job" begins on the first day of class, when the course syllabus is reviewed. Early in the semester, a one hour library workshop is scheduled outside of class time, in which a librarian will cover global Internet search strategies. A detailed discussion of the assignment occurs after the topic of marketing research, between international marketing and market segmentation/targeting.

It is suggested to students that they view the entire world as the potential market for their services or entrepreneurial ventures. They must decide then on which bases are meaningful and useful for them for dividing this huge market, such as by continent, language, religion or economy (industrial vs. third world). Having determined these significant characteristics, they are asked to evaluate all potential markets based on them and to select one country to target. Students are given three weeks to complete the assignment, and they are graded by graduate assistants. The assignment comprises about 5% of each student's final grade.

#### **ASSESSMENT METHODOLOGY**

Though anecdotal evidence from students indicated the assignment successfully accomplished several learning goals, a more formal assessment of the assignment's value was deemed appropriate. To gauge the extent of benefits, how widespread they are among students, and whether certain student characteristics are associated with greater benefits, a written questionnaire was designed, pretested and administered to students who had completed the assignment.

Initially the questionnaire consisted of 12 items, but was expanded to 22 questions upon revision and after review by colleagues. The expanded questionnaire was pretested for clarity and internal validity among a convenient sample of students, and it was determined to take about seven minutes to complete. Necessary revisions were accomplished.

For consistency, all possible questions employed 10 point bipolar or semantic differential scales. These self-assessment measures essentially estimated value-added in seven areas from completing the assignment. Additionally, five areas of perceived complexity/sophistication of and general

satisfaction with the assignment, plus personal characteristics of the students were determined.

Specifically, the value-added items measured:

1. increased familiarity with electronic information sources,
2. increased familiarity with foreign market research using electronic information sources,
3. increased awareness of the amount of valuable information on the targeted country available through electronic information sources,
4. increased awareness of situational facts about the targeted country,
5. increased understanding of applying the concepts of segmentation and targeting the global marketplace,
6. increased knowledge of how to do business (at an elementary level) with a foreign market,
7. increased interest in further study of or a career in international business.

Plus, for reliability purposes for item 2, another question measured increase of electronic information research skills on foreign markets (Churchill 1999, p. 408).

The five areas of perceived complexity/sophistication and general satisfaction specifically measured:

1. diversity of information sources,
2. hours spent on the assignment,
3. search hours invested on the Internet,
4. number of different Internet/Web sites visited,
5. degree of general satisfaction with the assignment.

The five specific, personal characteristics identified:

1. location of the personal computer(s) used to access the Internet,
2. number of international, Internet searches performed in the last
3. major area(s) of emphasis in university studies,
4. gender,
5. number of years of U.S. residency.

## RESULTS

The anonymous questionnaire so far has been administered during classtime to 93 undergraduate students and 21 graduate students, who completed the assignment. In order to increase the sample size, students from

next semester who have completed the assignment will also complete the questionnaire. At the time of this writing, data from three particularly salient questions from the 93 undergraduate students have been computer analyzed. Additionally, preliminary analyses of the pretest data are presented, though certainly no conclusions can be drawn from that small sample.

Data from the first of the three salient questions analyzed from the 93 undergraduate students dealt with the amount of valuable information they actually found through electronic information sources about their targeted country compared to their expectations. On a 10-point scale with 1 = much less than expected, and 10 = much more than expected, data demonstrated the widest possible range, all the way from 1 to 10. The average rating was a moderately high 7.0.

The second question analyzed from the 93 undergraduate students focused on one aspect of the complexity or sophistication of the assignment. Asking how many hours were spent searching the Internet for the assignment, again the data showed the widest possible range, from 1 hour to 10 or more hours. Because of the "10 or more" category, a true average cannot be determined. With that caveat in mind, treating "10 or more" as simply 10 hours produced an "estimated average" of 5.1 hours spent searching the Internet for the assignment.

The final question analyzed from the 93 undergraduate students measured satisfaction with the assignment given the benefits gained and time spent on it. On a scale of 1 = extremely dissatisfied and 10 = extremely satisfied, students' rated their satisfaction with a range of 1 to 10. Visual inspection demonstrated only one rating of 1, zero ratings of 2, and four ratings of 3. The average level of satisfaction with the assignment was a moderately high 7.1.

More thorough but preliminary analyses of the pretest data (due to small sample size) indicate highly encouraging findings about the perceived value of the assignment. Among the value-added questions:

1. Familiarity with electronic information sources increased an average of 2.25 points after completing the assignment (10 point scale, 1 = not at all familiar, 10 = extremely familiar). Familiarity before the assignment

- ranged from 3 to 7. Familiarity after the assignment ranged from 6 to 9.
2. Familiarity with conducting research on foreign markets using electronic information sources increased an average of 3.0 points after completing the assignment (10 point scale, 1 = not at all familiar, 10 = extremely familiar). Familiarity before the assignment ranged from 2 to 6. Familiarity after the assignment ranged from 6 to 9.
  3. Increase of electronic information research skills on foreign markets (a reliability measure for item #2, above) had an average rating of 8.25 (10 point scale, 1 = not at all helpful, 10 = extremely helpful). The range was from 7 to 10. Small sample size precludes statistical correlation with item #2. It appears highly positively correlated from visual examination.
  4. Awareness of the information actually available on the targeted country through electronic information sources compared to expectations was rated an average of 8.5 (10 point scale, 1 = much less than expected, 10 = much more than expected). The range was from 8 to 9.
  5. Increase in awareness of situational facts about the targeted country had an average rating of 5.0 (10 point scale, 1 = not at all surprised, 10 = extremely surprised). This item had a rather wide range from 3 to 8.
  6. Understanding of applying the concepts of segmentation and targeting increased an average of 3.0 points after completing the assignment (10 point scale, 1 = almost nothing, 10 = an extreme amount). Understanding before the assignment ranged from 2 to 7. Understanding after the assignment ranged from 7 to 9.
  7. Understanding of doing business in the targeted country increased an average of 4.5 points after completing the assignment (10 point scale, 1 = almost nothing, 10 = an extreme amount). Understanding before the assignment ranged from 1 to 7. Understanding after the assignment ranged from 8 to 9.
  8. Resulting from this assignment, interest in further study of or a career in international business increased an average of 7.25 points (10 point scale, 1 = not at all increased, 10 = extremely increased). The wide range of responses spanned from 3 to 10.

Among the perceived complexity / sophistication and general satisfaction questions:

1. The number of information sources used to complete the assignment was 3 for all pretest respondents. Choices listed included: Lexis-Nexis, Internet, printed library references, others [please list]. The percentage of information obtained from the Internet demonstrated a wide range, from 0% to 60%. However, all respondents used a computer. Twenty five percent of them used electronic information sources other than the Internet, such as CD-ROMs and library-subscribed electronic information sources.
2. The number of hours spent collecting the requested information about the targeted country had a rather wide range from 3 to 10 or more, with 50% answering 10 or more. An average cannot be calculated because of the 10 or more category. Based on pretest feedback, this question was modified on the final questionnaire to ask, "Approximately how many hours did you spend on the entire assignment?" The revised question has greater differentiation from the next question that was asked, and provides better insight to the instructor considering adopting the assignment.
3. The number of hours spent searching the Internet for the assignment averaged 4.5 hours (no one selected 10 or more). The range extended from 3 to 6 hours.
4. The number of different Internet/Web sites visited for the assignment averaged 3.75 sites. The answers ranged from 2 to 6 sites.
5. The degree of general satisfaction considering what was gained and time spent completing the assignment averaged 9.0 (10 point scale, 1 = extremely dissatisfied, 10 = extremely satisfied). The range spanned only positive responses from 8 to 10.

The five questions about specific, personal characteristics of respondents generated:

1. For the assignment, all respondents utilized personal computers located in their homes and at the University Library. No one used personal computers at work or "other."
2. None of the respondents had performed an international Internet search in the last year before this assignment.
3. Fifty percent of respondents had selected a major area of academic emphasis in marketing, while the other fifty percent had chosen accounting.
4. Seventy-five percent of respondents were female, with twenty-five percent male.

6. All respondents had resided in the United States over 10 years.

### **DISCUSSION AND LIMITATIONS**

No definite conclusions can be drawn from the preliminary analyses of the pretest data, because of both a small sample size and bias due to the volunteer nature of sample selection. Nonetheless, the results suggest cautious optimism that formal survey analyses will demonstrate great learning value from this international Internet assignment.

Specifically, preliminary analyses suggest substantial average increases in students' familiarity with electronic information sources, in general and for foreign market research. Despite varying degrees of familiarity before completing the assignment, all respondents expressed increases as a result of the research project. Corroborating their increase in familiarity with foreign market, electronic information sources, respondents reported large increases in their research skills using those sources.

Additionally, the assignment appears to have taught students that electronic information sources offer much more information about foreign markets than they might expect. Surprise at some statistics or facts learned about the targeted country showed a fairly wide range of degrees, suggesting varying levels of prior knowledge by the respondents.

Understanding of applying the concepts of segmentation and targeting of markets, and of doing business in the targeted country increased rather significantly as a result of completing the research project. Porter and McKibbin's (1988) study encourages learning of such practical applications of business theory. Furthermore, the project spawned a large, average increase in interest for further study of or a career in international business. But a wide range of individual responses implies great variation among each student's interest.

Pretest respondents' perceptions of the research project indicated complexity and sophistication in terms of utilizing 3 different types of information sources, all students using electronic information sources both at home and at the University Library, spending between 3 and 10 or more hours collecting information, working on the Internet an average of 4.5 hours,

and visiting an average of 3.75 Internet sites. When asked about their general level of satisfaction considering their efforts and benefits gained from the assignment, students overwhelmingly rated it an average of 9.0, with 10 being "extremely satisfied."

References and Exhibit 1 available upon request.