

AN INTERACTIVE SECONDARY RESEARCH PROJECT FOR A LARGE, DIVERSE INTRODUCTORY MARKETING CLASS: A PEDAGOGICAL MODEL

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ABSTRACT

Employers are demanding that graduates and not just marketing graduates, possess the skills to find information, interpret it, and then utilize it to make sound managerial decisions. But in the realm of an undergraduate principles of marketing course, secondary research skills are often overlooked, either because of course size or time constraints. The authors discuss one solution that allows the marketing educator of a large class to enhance students' marketing research skills, while also minimizing the impacts of preparation and grading.

INTRODUCTION

With the profound changes in marketing education curricula, university administrators and academicians must challenge themselves to develop and implement effective interactive projects. According to Barnes and Byrne (1990) "over the last decade there has been an increasing pressure in higher education to provide courses which have a vocational orientation and which equip students with the insights and skills for employment." Additionally, the guidelines of the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) state that "the curriculum shall be responsive to social, economic, and technological developments and shall reflect the application of evolving knowledge in economics and the behavioral and quantitative sciences." Marketing education is inextricably dependent upon these sciences and, as a conduit, marketing educators must be responsive to these issues. To answer this challenge, this paper discusses a working, interactive marketing research project for large principles of marketing courses.

THE CHALLENGE TO MARKETING ACADEMIA

Students enrolled in principles of marketing classes are customarily indoctrinated into the benefit of marketing as a strategy to determine the needs of potential markets. Though principles of marketing textbooks address secondary marketing research, instructors may not find it feasible to cover this topic in depth during a single semester. Marketing curricula have traditionally exposed students to the marketing research process by offering two courses:

Principles of Marketing and Marketing Research (Turnquist, Bialaszewski, and Franklin 1991). Healy, Cully, and Cudd (1975) suggest that a short fall of these courses is the failure to train tomorrow's managers in secondary methods. For example, nearly two-thirds of the business students they surveyed could not find a published balance sheet for a major corporation such as Proctor and Gamble.

Prospective employers are calling for greater exposure of students to real-life problems; they want universities to emphasize practice rather than theory in the marketing curriculum (Malhotra, Tashchian, and Jain 1989). Lesch and Hazeltine (1990) suggest that instructors may be frustrated, ". . . absent meaningful guidance for the presentation of secondary research methodology, instructors may not be qualified or inclined to develop and assign interesting, non-trivial classroom problems." Academicians can profess the marketing concept in theory, but hands-on marketing study provides interactive learning--to provide students the skills to actively identify market needs and wants.

However, there are numerous obstacles to teaching both marketing research and the ability to collect and examine secondary methods, such as class composition and class size. Many students who partake in a principles of marketing course are not marketing majors, and may not even be business majors. The authors would like to submit that marketing research, especially secondary data, is an essential skill in the educational background of any professional and such a pedagogical learning tool does exist to meet those demands. The value of secondary marketing research skills as stated by Lesch and Hazeltine (1990) is that secondary research sharpens problem formulation and leads to better-informed managerial decisions. Therefore, a principles class of more than 200 students with diverse majors is an excellent forum to administer a marketing research project that exposes a group of students to the skills that employers are demanding.

THE LITERATURE

The literature proposing pedagogical tools in marketing research is limited. "Relatively few articles have

dealt with general pedagogical aspects of teaching marketing research" (Ganesh 1992). None have addressed the implementation of a market research assessment project to a large class (200 or more) composed of diverse majors. This paper introduces a model of such a project.

THE PROJECT

This particular principles of marketing course is taught at a major university in the western United States every semester in a lecture format. Approximately 475 junior and senior undergraduate students are separated into two sections of 200 students and one evening section of 75 students. According to Dunipace and Thompson (1993) the increased demand for marketing, the expansion of marketing curriculum, and the decrease in budget all have affected the classroom size. One of the problems with a large class is administrative. Grading written term papers or case studies would take an immense amount of time. Therefore, the challenge is to design a project which accomplishes pedagogical goals and also minimizes the administrative logistics.

In 1986 the professors at this university began administering a work sheet-style project that required the students to do secondary marketing research at the campus library. The work sheet format, as defined by the authors, utilizes a question and answer format to achieve the instructor-based objectives. This is beneficial to both faculty and students because, first, it enables the faculty to pose in-depth questions concerning the research process, while facilitating the task of grading. Secondly, it clarifies to the student what is specifically expected on the project. Lesch and Hazeltine (1990) advocate a structured format suggesting ". . . a structured approach makes the data search process less random, so that if efficiency in data gathering is the paramount objective, the search process should be structured."

Within the campus environment, the library is a good source to introduce secondary methods. According to Hawbaker and Littlejohn (1988), "Library research is virtually impossible to teach effectively without physical experience in the library and hands-on experience with the multiple tools." Additionally, structure is provided by the library staff through the designation of a table in the reference section exclusively for this project. The table contains all the marketing reference books that the students will need to complete the work sheet. With all the

resources in one location, a large number of students can work simultaneously, the reference librarians can keep track of the books, and the students can find information faster which allows the work sheet to encompass many areas of marketing research.

The work sheet requires students to research the controllable elements of the marketing mix and the uncontrollable elements of the environment, and then asks them to explain briefly how their findings affect the target market. The following pages provide an explanation of each functional section of the work sheet.

The Scene

The Scene provides a brief, one-page situation analysis of the general concept of the project. It contains three components. The first component is a short, comical story about a fictitious character that requests the students to do marketing research because he/she is thinking of expanding his/her chain of retail stores. These stores have historically been general merchandise, food, electronic, or computer retailers. The second component identifies the objectives of the project, instructing the students to investigate the controllable and uncontrollable marketing elements, and then to relate their findings to the target market. The final component is a list of the selected business and marketing reference books, including their call numbers, that the students must utilize to find the necessary data.

Parameters

This includes administrative information concerning grading criteria, the due dates for project completion, to whom students should direct questions, and location of the designated table in the library.

The Controllable Marketing Elements

Product. To pose questions in this area as well as other areas throughout the work sheet, the project requires the students to choose a specific product. To preserve academic honesty, the students are assigned a department of a store based on their last name, and then instructed to choose a specific product that the store would inventory in that department. For example, if their last name is Hastings, their department is *Hardware* and the student can pick any product that one may find in that department, such as a *Hammer*.

Once a specific product has been identified, the students must answer more individual product-related questions. These include the Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) number, the top company within that SIC number, the name and address of a trade association related to their specific product, a magazine or journal article associated with the marketing of that product, and their product's stage in the product life cycle.

Price. Just as the students were required to select a specific product, they are now asked to choose a sizeable city (more than 50,000 population) in the United States that begins with the first two letters of their first name. This system again serves well in upholding the students' academic honesty by preventing students from researching the same city (historically, many students have researched the city where the university is located), while asking area-specific questions about the target market.

This section also introduces the students to a cost of living index. This index lists prices for certain items in cities across the country. Evaluating the prices of products enables students to better understand and contrast the geographical influences concerning pricing strategies. The students record the prices of four products that the new store would sell if the chain expanded to their chosen cities.

Place. The students are asked to research the channels of distribution available to send and receive shipments of products in their chosen cities. The students identify transportation modes and providers. For example, one transportation mode could be *Airline* and the specific example could be *Continental*. Additionally, the students must explain which transportation mode would be most suitable for their specific products.

Promotion. Questions concerning promotion again require the use of the students' chosen cities. These questions ask the students to research radio stations, newspapers, and television stations that serve their chosen cities. As a result, the students better understand the complexities of marketing communication. A final question requires the students to explain which advertising medium would be most suitable for promotion of their selected product.

The Uncontrollable Elements

Resources. This section addresses the need for marketing researchers to evaluate the desirability of

potential cities when considering to expand or relocate a business. Utilizing place-rating guides, the students evaluate their chosen cities in terms of four criteria: cost of living, crime rate, transportation, and education. They are then asked to comment on the desirability of their city based on these ratings. Additionally, students use several directories to identify the names, addresses, and contact persons of two companies that they would consider contacting for employment.

Demographics. Students are required in this section to research demographic variables and purchasing behaviors regarding the population in their chosen cities, the target market. The questions ask which county the city is located in, the population of the county, the median age of this population, the total retail sales for the city, and the principal retail shopping days in their city. This enables the students to consider the characteristics of their target markets.

Social. Marketing researchers must also consider the social aspects affecting a new store. For example, a current social issue affecting retailers is the trend toward environmentally friendly products. The students are instructed to use an environmental source book to identify companies that make certain environmentally friendly products that the new store may want to use internally or stock for resale.

Technology. Many business courses introduce students to the latest computer database or information technologies. Market researchers use many databases to uncover information. An explanation is provided of how to use one of the computer databases in the library. The students then utilize a company profile database to identify companies related to their specific product.

Economic. Economic variables will also affect the expansion of a chain into a new market. Utilizing area market guides to identify these variables, the students evaluate the principal industries and financial institutions located in their chosen cities that may influence the company's marketing strategies. Economic information helps the researcher understand the economic stability of both the potential consumers and the region as a whole.

Competition. Students are asked to use a business directory to identify the top four competitors of the retail chain in the country, as well as the numbers of employees and sales of those companies. Students then utilize a recent copy of a business journal to

research stock-related information for these companies. The students also find the executive board members, their titles, and the addresses for these top competitors.

Political/Legal. The final section concerning the uncontrollable variables allow the students to consider consumer protection laws or statutes. The students are directed to a law digest to investigate the laws of the state in which their chosen cities are located. In a final question, the students then explain the law or statute, and how it may affect a new store in that area. Managers of the future must understand the local, state, and federal laws affecting their business dealings.

STUDENT ANALYSIS AND FEEDBACK

The final question on the work sheet is a brief, one page essay designed to elicit important marketing feedback. It assesses the ability of the students to relate their work sheet findings to the target market and it gathers feedback concerning the project's educational value.

The students discuss whether or not they support locating a new store in their chosen cities. Students can now evaluate the location based on the controllable and uncontrollable variables. By doing so, they can also discuss their conclusions based on the three objectives as stated in the beginning of the project, thus finalizing the learning objectives.

To address the educational benefit to the student, they are asked: "Was this a learning experience?" Over the years, feedback from this question has led to many constructive revisions to the project. Some interesting findings emerge: On average, nine out of ten students express positive feedback that learning basic research skills will be useful to them in other disciplines and future entrepreneurial ventures. Those students who do indicate negative feedback communicate that the project was either too impersonal, busy work, unrelated to their major, or demanded skills already acquired.

The authors suggest that a project of this nature could be expanded to include graduate classes, enhanced computer integration, multiple versions to maintain academic integrity, service-related organizations, and, finally, specialized sources to accommodate special interest courses.

CONCLUSION

Acquiring marketing research skills is essential for students to be competitive in a global environment, which is supported by the demands of both the AACSB and industry. This project allows an instructor of a mass section of diverse students to facilitate the hands-on, project method approach in the research of secondary data.

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