ANALYZING MARKETING DEPARTMENT CURRICULUM AND IMPROVING MARKETING EDUCATION THROUGH BENCHMARKING

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ABSTRACT

Benchmarking is a powerful technique frequently used by major corporations as a key component of their total quality management (TQM) program. This paper provides a review of the benchmarking process and a model of benchmarking for curricular development and improvement in marketing departments.

INTRODUCTION

An effective curriculum is a critical component to a quality education offered by any marketing department. The process of curriculum analysis and revision is a difficult, yet important, factor of a marketing department's success. Without a well-planned marketing curriculum, even master teachers cannot provide a quality education. In evaluating marketing curriculum, several factors must be considered: the needs of marketing students, AACSB requirements, the needs of businesses hiring graduates, competitive school curriculum offerings, and the department or college mission statement. This paper offers a new technique which can be used by marketing departments to improve curriculum.

The current state of the undergraduate marketing curriculum is well-documented in the study by Turnquist, Bialaszewski, and Franklin [1991]. They analyzed the curriculum offerings of 230 AACSB-accredited schools. Studies such as this can provide a start in curriculum analysis, but many questions are left unanswered. Mayo and Miciak [1991] use a model of curriculum development in their empirical investigation of decision processes used by marketing educators in curriculum revision. They stress the importance of a market-oriented approach to curriculum, emphasizing the needs of the business community.

Unfortunately, businesses are often critical of academic, "Ivory Tower" curriculum offered by many marketing departments today. Chonko and Caballero [1991] discuss some of the criticisms from business, such as, "business school curricula are falling further behind in new technologies, production methods, global competition strategies, and the like." Bruce Stern has commented that "the winds of change" are occurring in both American business and business education [1992]. With the desire and critical need to improve marketing curriculum, marketing educators need an effective method of analysis.

A frequently used technique found in major corporations today, which may be useful to marketing departments in curriculum analysis, is called benchmarking. Recent studies indicate that by 1995 most major U.S. corporations will use some type of benchmarking program [Schmidt 1992]. Benchmarking first gained popularity as a technique which was invented by Xerox in the late 1970's to study the Japanese and other major competitors [Maturi 1990]. Benchmarking is primarily a process to search for the "best practices" in an industry and then use that information for the purpose of change and improvement in performance. Robert C. Camp, well known for his work on benchmarking, suggests that this practice will result in superior performance, if used effectively. He believes that companies must learn from others and measure themselves regularly against the best in the industry [Camp 1989].

Two primary objectives of this paper are: (1) to review the history and benefits of benchmarking in business and (2) to present a model of benchmarking for curriculum development in marketing departments.

HISTORY OF BENCHMARKING

Benchmarking is the continuous process of studying specific processes and practices within best-in-class companies [Tyndall 1990]. The primary interest of benchmarking is to improve a company's performance. One survey of Fortune 1000 companies found that 65% of the respondents stated they use benchmarking as a management tool in order to gain competitive advantage [Foster 1992]. An article in Financial World stated that 60-70% of the largest U.S. corporations now have some kind of benchmarking program in place [Biesada 1991]. In another study, 79% of the respondents believe that companies must bench-mark in order to survive [Owen 1992].

For many companies, benchmarking is a key component of their total quality management (TQM) program [Whiting 1991]. One method of improving one's own quality is to analyze the best quality practices of other successful companies. Although the practice of TQM has gained great momentum in recent years, some companies still have difficulty with benchmarking projects which actually produce tangible results. Many do not complete the entire benchmarking process.

One organization has assisted companies in this benchmarking process. The American Productivity and Quality Center (APQC), a non-profit, Houston based organization, founded in 1977, was formed to improve the quality of U.S. products and competitiveness of U.S. companies. Recently APQC launched the International Benchmarking Clearinghouse (IBC), designed to help companies learn from one another. The IBC attracted companies such as IBM, Hewlett-Packard, and McDonnel Douglas to its program [Harper 1992]. The IBC system assists companies who desire greater anonymity in their benchmarking efforts.

PROCESS OF BENCHMARKING

Benchmarking is a continuous process of measuring a company's performance against the best. Xerox Corporation developed the original rules for the process benchmarking, while many other companies have helped to refine the process [Maturi 1990; Martin 1991; and Owen 1992]. The basic steps in the benchmarking process are as follows:

1. Identify what business functions will be benchmarked.
2. Determine the specific key performance variables to measure.
3. Carefully identify and research the target benchmark companies considered best-in-class. Measure their performance.
4. Approach target companies directly, indicating they were approached because they are recognized leaders, and establish a relationship with a benchmark partner(s). (Have a fall-back plan if a targeted company will not cooperate).
5. Initiate a plan for data collection and collect data which will measure the firm's own per-formance. Measure the best-in-class company and analyze current performance gaps.
6. Be prepared to exchange information and be willing to accept that a benchmark company may not have the solution to a problem.
7. Use the findings to establish functional goals and action plans for change.
8. Take action for improvement and monitor results.
9. Remember that the aim is to fix the problem, not just review others' performance.
10. Attain the maturity state where the best practices are fully integrated into all business processes.

This process of benchmarking is now used by many major U.S. corporations. Elimination of any one step may create a critical error in the benchmarking process. If implemented correctly, benchmarking is a critical part to the success of a company's TQM process.

Corporations may have questions on how to identify the best-in-class companies. One method used to identify best-in-class may be to consider an existing published source, such as Fortune's most admired companies [Fortune 1992]. A company interested specifically in effective sales techniques might consider Sales and Marketing Management's list of best sales forces [Sales and Marketing Management 1992]. These published sources of data may provide a start in the selection process for an appropriate benchmark partner.

The primary benefit of a successful benchmarking program is improvement in performance or actually superior performance. The process provides a method for companies to resolve deficiencies and, therefore, gain greater competitiveness in the marketplace. Companies that do not make competitive comparisons or benchmark, often find it difficult to compete with firms that do [Owen 1992]. Another significant benefit of benchmarking is that it breaks down the reluctance of operations to change [Camp 1989]. Benchmarking encourages flexibility and acceptance of change.

In the end, benchmarking can help a business to better serve its customers, increase competitiveness, and reduce costs [Sillyman 1992].

MODEL OF BENCHMARKING FOR USE IN CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT IN MARKETING DEPARTMENTS

After getting its start in the manufacturing industry with companies such as Xerox, benchmarking is rapidly making its way into the service industry [Biesada 1991]. Experts suggest that one good way to identify companies that benchmark is to look for evidence of change, the end point of the benchmarking process. Unfortunately, higher education is not exactly recognized for its desire or ability to change. Marketing departments, in particular, could use the principles of benchmarking in order to alter curriculum which will then improve the quality of education. This could be accomplished through analysis of the processes and practices of curriculum development in other successful marketing departments.

As marketing educators, we teach the importance of competitive analysis and marketing audits, yet marketing departments themselves rarely follow these principles. Benchmarking would allow a marketing department to discover deficiencies in curriculums, make changes, and gain greater competitiveness in the market.

A model of benchmarking could be used by marketing departments to improve their curriculum offering. Before describing such a model, some of the current curriculum issues and problems should be reviewed. A primary issue facing all AACSB accredited schools involves the integration of an international perspective into curriculum. Kaynak, Yucelt, and Barker [1990] support the need to prepare students for the global marketing arena in their study of international marketing curriculum. Schoell [1991] discusses the role international students may play in the process of internationalizing marketing curriculum. Benchmarking could help discover the many varied and successful techniques used by marketing departments in internationalizing curriculum.

A concern somewhat related to the international issue relates to the increasing cultural diversity in the student population and in the workplace. A study of the Hispanic population found the need for marketing educators to respond to culturally diverse groups [Penaloza and Gilly 1991]. Again, benchmarking may help a marketing department discover more information and methods of change related to cultural diversity.

Integration of ethics into marketing curriculum has been a critical challenge for marketing educators in the 1990's [Feldman and Thompson 1990]. Gaidis and Andrews [1990] suggest an experiential approach in the integration of ethics into marketing curriculum. Learning how to integrate ethical considerations into curriculum may be achieved through benchmarking.

Kelley [1992] has recently discussed integrating business etiquette into marketing curriculum. Others have discussed the importance of interdisciplinary offerings [Alden et al 1991] or the inclusion of popular entertainment [Lynch and Shank 1991] into marketing curriculum. Reviewing the marketing literature is one important method of curriculum analysis and revision. Benchmarking is another.

A model of benchmarking for the purpose of curriculum development within marketing departments could be organized as follows:

1. WHAT TO BENCHMARK: Determine the primary curriculum issues which will be benchmarked such as:
   - integrating international into the curriculum
   - integrating ethics into the curriculum
   - integrating etiquette into the curriculum
2. KEY PERFORMANCE VARIABLES: If "Integration of Etiquette into Curriculum" is the item to be benchmarked, then the following key performance variables may be used in measurement:
   - business etiquette skills to be taught
   - where to teach etiquette skills
   - techniques for teaching etiquette skills
3. SELECT BEST-IN-CLASS MARKETING DEPARTMENTS: The key is "best-in-class," not necessarily absolute best. Selecting a comparable, yet well-respected marketing department will be important. If "Integration of Etiquette into Curriculum" is the benchmark issue, then a marketing department will want to select a benchmark school which has successfully done this.
4. ESTABLISH RELATIONSHIP WITH TARGETED MARKETING DEPARTMENT(S): The likely individual to contact will be the department Chair. An explanation of the purpose of this "benchmarking" activity will be necessary to help establish such a partnership.
5. PLAN THE DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES: An analysis of the benchmark marketing department and the department's own performance will be necessary to determine performance gaps.
6. EXCHANGE INFORMATION: After a high level of trust has been established, departments may

share valuable information. Ethically, each department has an obligation to share accurate information once an agreement is reached. Also, a department may need approval from a Dean or other administrator to release some of the information, such as a course syllabus.

7. ESTABLISH GOALS AND ACTION PLANS: The key to successful benchmarking is the strategy development and implementation of needed changes. All faculty members of the department should be involved in the process of curriculum change.

8. TAKE ACTION: Through this process, the marketing department may be less resistant to change and be willing to take the steps necessary to achieve an improved curriculum. The real value of the benchmarking process will be evident with this step of actual implementation of a new curriculum.

9. FULL INTEGRATION OF BEST-IN-CLASS MARKETING DEPARTMENT PROCEDURES: According to the stages of the adoption process, the marketing department now has adopted the curriculum suggestions of the benchmark marketing department. If the issue has been "Integration of Etiquette Into the Curriculum," the marketing department has successfully integrated business etiquette skills into their curriculum.

A marketing department using this model may be able to initiate significant and beneficial changes for the department. As many business schools face declining enrollment and severe funding problems, marketing departments cannot afford to remain static with their potentially outdated curriculum.

CONCLUSION

Benchmarking, a proven technique used by American businesses to improve quality and performance, could be used successfully by college/university marketing departments to improve curriculum. This paper offers a basic model for marketing departments to use in initiating a benchmark program. Several alternatives could be available to a marketing department:

1. As the paper suggests, select another college/university marketing department as a benchmark partner. Most likely, this benchmark school will be selected because of its reputation in curriculum development. A department may have more than one benchmark partner depending on the objectives of benchmarking.

2. A marketing department could use a "within organization model," where it simply benchmarks on another department within the school. This could be a starting point in the benchmark process. For example, a marketing department interested in revising and updating curriculum could benchmark on another successful department. This experience could be a beginning in learning the usefulness of benchmarking.

3. If a benchmark partner does not agree to participate or if the marketing department is not yet ready to establish such a relationship, then the department could use an alternative form of competitive intelligence such as acquiring public information on another school's marketing department. Ethical considerations are important in gathering such information. Curriculum offerings of another school could be acquired through catalogs or other public documents.

4. A marketing department might organize a benchmarking effort through an independent, third party organization, such as the American Marketing Association or another respected organization. Benchmark marketing departments might initially contribute curriculum information "anonymously." This proposed system is similar to the IBC organized for businesses.

Any of the above four alternatives may work as a start in the benchmarking process. The literature suggests the success of benchmarking in business and marketing departments might also benefit from this powerful technique in their curriculum decisions. Knowing that change is needed, this technique might provide the method for curriculum change within a marketing department.

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