

INTERNSHIPS AND ETHICAL DECISION MAKING

Regina P. Schlee
Seattle Pacific University
Seattle, WA 98155
(206) 281-3638

ABSTRACT

This article examines how internships may be used as a means of reinforcing the ethical decision making processes learned in the classroom. The faculty advisor can help student interns elaborate the alternatives available to them so that when they are faced with ethical dilemmas in the workplace, interns can make decisions concordant with their ethical values. This article examines the types of ethical dilemmas often faced by student interns as well as recommendations for incorporating an ethics component in student internships.

INTRODUCTION

Through the 1980s and 1990s marketing professors have demonstrated an increased concern about teaching ethics to marketing students. WMEA members are for the most part familiar with a large number of articles on ethics published at the Journal of Marketing Education, WMEA Proceedings, and the Business and Professional Ethics Journal. These articles generally fall in the following categories: theories of ethics (Geurts and Fraedrich 1990; Kirkpatrick 1989); pedagogies for teaching ethics in the classroom (Berdine 1987; Cohen 1987; Gaidis and Andrews 1990; Schaupp, et al. 1992; Smith and VanDoren 1989); applications of ethics in specific topics in Marketing (Kelley 1988; Pamental 1987); effectiveness of ethics instruction in marketing classes (Feldman and Thompson 1990; Harris and Guffey 1991); ethical standards of students (Clayson 1991; Donoho and Swenson 1992; Taylor, et al. 1992), and comparisons between the values of marketing professionals and marketing students (Budner 1988; Kassarian and Kahn 1989; Whipple and Wolf 1991).

However, in spite of the effort placed in teaching ethics in the marketing curriculum, many of these studies also document that instruction in marketing ethics is not always as effective as we would have liked (Feldman and Thompson 1990; Harris and Guffey 1991). In fact, many researchers in the field of marketing ethics believe that instruction in ethics does not necessarily change how students will act when they enter the workplace, but makes them more sensitive to ethical issues (Geurts and Fraedrich 1990). Other researchers, however, do not believe that it is enough to create greater understanding in the area of ethics, but want to help students learn the process of resolving ethical conflicts through the use of case studies (Feldman and Thompson 1990; Gaidis and Andrews 1990; Schaupp, et al. 1992) or student debates (Berdine 1987).

The Arthur Anderson & Co. program on Business Ethics (1990) also relies extensively on case studies to develop an understanding of ethical issues and conflict resolution skills. The Arthur Anderson organization has developed a series of seven steps to help students and business practitioners arrive at a resolution of ethical dilemmas by identifying the facts, the ethical issues, the alternatives, the stakeholders, the ethics of the alternatives and the practical constraints. Langenderfer and Rockness (1989) present a more elaborate list of eight steps to ethical decision making. The major difference between the Arthur Anderson list of seven steps and Langenderfer and Rockness's eight steps is the addition by the later of a step where the alternatives are discussed "with a trusted person to help gain greater perspective." Thus, Langenderfer and Rockness recognize the difficulty that students have in making ethical decisions and believe that the addition of an outside trusted person would facilitate the

process of ethical decision making. Armstrong (1990), writing for accounting professors, criticizes the Langenderfer and Rockness "8-Step Method" in that it does not go far enough to underscore the importance of obtaining professional guidance in making ethical decisions. She states that "thinking about consequences, stakeholders, values, principles, and norms is a necessary condition of good moral decision making, but it is not a sufficient decision" (p. 190).

How can marketing faculty teach ethics so that when students are faced with ethical dilemmas, they will not only be able to examine the alternatives open to them, but will also make an ethical choice? In-class case analyses allow students to go through the steps needed in the process, but the consequences of different actions are not real. Would students react differently in a real world setting as opposed to the classroom? Possibly. Personal experience supervising marketing interns over the years, leads this author to the conclusion that students exhibit more bravado in class discussions than they do in real life situations. In fact, many marketing interns have reported to me feelings of frustration and discouragement because they found themselves in ethical dilemmas where every option represented a "no win" for them.

In the discussion that follows I will present a description of the technique I have used for the past two years to assist students enrolled in internships make ethical decisions. Each quarter an average of two to four students ask me to serve as the faculty advisor for their internships. Although my observations are based on a small number of students enrolled at a private religiously affiliated university in Seattle, Washington, the ethical dilemmas they encountered and their responses may not be different of those of most marketing undergraduates. In fact, Donoho and Swenson (1992) found that the deontological moral reasoning most often associated with students in religiously affiliated universities is also prevalent among students of public universities. Furthermore, when the interns I supervised were faced with "real life" ethical dilemmas, they used a variety of ethical orientations to analyze the

situation. However, since this article is based on a small number of cases, no attempt is made to quantify the findings. Instead, I will discuss the types of ethical dilemmas faced by the student interns I supervised and the decisions these students made. Finally, I will present my recommendations for marketing faculty supervising student internships.

INTERNSHIP GUIDELINES

Our university requires all business students to take a class on Business Ethics. Ethics is also incorporated into every business and economic class taught. Thus, students signing up for a marketing internship have at the very minimum a basic understanding of ethical theories. But, outside of case analyses in the classroom, few of them have experience in trying to apply ethical theories in "real world" decision making. In order to help students apply ethical judgment to their internships, I use the following process:

1. Students have to prepare a contract outlining their responsibilities to their faculty advisor and their employer. They are expected to provide their faculty advisor in addition to an academically oriented paper or project, a weekly log of their activities and a paper discussing ethical concerns they encountered in their internship.
2. Students at the beginning of the quarter meet with Career Center staff. The purpose of this meeting is to explain to students the requirements for their internship and to reassure them that if they need help during their internship, they can talk to Career Center staff and their faculty advisor about it.
3. Students have to meet regularly during the quarter with their advisor and to discuss their concerns about every aspect of their internship experience.
4. At the end of the quarter, students submit all written materials to their faculty advisor and discuss competency and ethical issues.

These guidelines were designed to provide the necessary support for students making ethically based decisions in their internships, but they are

by no means a full proof system assuring ethical decision making in every occasion. After the ethics component was added to internships, the incidence of students reporting they made ethically based decisions increased, but the majority of students still indicated that they took no action when they saw others engage in unethical behavior in the work place. The following section attempts to classify the types of internships students were in and the type of action they took. This classification will hopefully allow marketing professors supervising internships to advise marketing interns accordingly.

TYPE OF MARKETING INTERNSHIP/ TYPE OF ETHICAL DILEMMA

The dimensions used to classify student internship situations are as follows:

1. Presence or absence of a company code of ethics.
2. Degree of power given to the student intern. If the company was owned by a family member, the student was viewed as having significant decision making power.
3. Whether the student observes others involved in unethical behavior or whether he or she is personally wrestling with an ethical dilemma.

These dimensions can be used to classify student internships in eight categories. Internships, however, are not evenly distributed in these categories. In most of the internships I supervised students told me that they observed others engaged in unethical behavior, but that they were not asked to make blatantly unethical decisions themselves. There are several explanations for this relative lack of pressure on interns to engage in unethical behavior: (a) it is possible that since employers had received a copy of the student's internship contract which included an ethics component, they decided not to ask students to do anything that might be construed as being unethical, (b) since most interns had little decision making power and are engaged in routinized tasks, they were not in the position to make unethical decisions, or (c) it may be easier to report on the unethical behavior of others, rather than one's own actions.

Interestingly, even students who indicated they felt pressured to engage in questionable behavior, were usually more concerned with the unethical behavior of others around them than with their own situation. I also did not supervise any internships where the student had significant decision making power in a company with widely recognized code of ethics.

Thus, the majority of internships I supervised fell into the following four categories: (1) company has code of ethics, student has low power, observes others engaged in unethical behavior, (2) company has no code of ethics, student has low power, observes others engaged in unethical behavior, (3) company has no code of ethics, student has low power, is asked to engage in unethical behavior, and (4) company has no code of ethics, student has substantial power, observes others engaged in unethical behavior. Examples of internships in each of these categories are discussed in the following section.

Student Internships by Category

1. Company has code of ethics, student has low power, observes others engaged in unethical behavior.

In most of these occasions, students saw violations of ethics occurring with their competitors rather than their employer. Some of the students I supervised worked in sales support functions for packaged goods companies and visited grocery stores with their supervisor. The students told me that their supervisor always provided truthful information to grocery store managers, while some of their competitors were known to provide misinformation about which brands and products would be discontinued. The students reported discussing ethical concerns with their supervisor and were reinforced to examine ethical issues and to do the "right thing" even though their competitors engage in unethical behavior. They concluded that the companies employing them as interns were successful because they provide the best products and services to their customers. They believe that companies that use misinformation and deceit in dealing with their customers are

shortsighted and eventually result in loss of market share.

Students employed in companies with a code of ethics are encouraged to continue their interest in developing ethical standards. Their experience in the corporate world reinforces what was learned in the classroom. Unfortunately, there is a limited number of internship opportunities with such companies.

2. Company has no code of ethics, student has low power, observes others engaged in unethical behavior.

Most of the internships I supervised over the last two years fall in this category. The majority of the student interns involved in such internships took no action to remedy the unethical practices they observed. The primary reason for their inaction was that (a) they did not feel that they were in a situation where they could effect change, and (b) the individuals involved (usually customers) appeared to be able to handle the situation on their own. In fact, the student interns believed that the employers or co-workers engaged in unethical behavior by deceiving customers and/or suppliers were hurting themselves the most.

When elaborating on the alternative courses of action they could take, students felt constrained by their personal lack of power. They justified their lack of action to change situations they defined as unethical by saying (a) no real harm was done to the customers (utilitarian approach), their supervisor would not listen to them (constraint), or they may be fired or receive a poor evaluation from their supervisor (constraint). The danger in internships where the student observes unethical behavior but does nothing about it is that the student will become cynical. Although unethical behavior exists in businesses, it should not be taken for granted. Students should become aware of the negative consequences of unethical behavior. Companies that deceive their customers and suppliers will suffer from morale problems. Good employees will not want to work for such companies.

An equally difficult situation occurs when the student faced with unethical behavior decides to confront the offending party. One of the students I supervised decided to discuss with her manager what she perceived as a violation of ethics. The student was working as a marketing intern and sales clerk at an espresso store and had observed that the store manager would attempt to sell cleaning supplies to customers. Some customers had indicated to the sales clerk (the student intern) that they considered the manager's sales techniques as totally inappropriate. When the manager dismissed the student's complaints as unwarranted, the student took the matter to the district manager. The district manager, however, told the student that is she was having a difficult time working with the store manager, she should quit.

This student discovered that being a "whistleblower" is a difficult task. Whistleblowers should be prepared for adversity and should be willing to pursue the matter to the end. I advised the student that she had two options: (a) inform the company president of what had happened, or (b) find another place of employment. Unfortunately, the student decided not to contact the company president, instead, she decided to look for another job.

This example has significant implications for marketing professors. Making ethical decisions is not an easy matter. Students need to be properly prepared for the consequences of their actions. Students also need to have an advisor, "a trusted person," to help examine the options available to them and the possible outcome of their actions.

3. Company has no code of ethics, student has low power, is asked to engage in unethical behavior.

As indicated earlier, under the guidelines of our internship program, it is very rare for a student intern to be asked to engage in blatantly unethical behavior. Most of the concerns voiced by students usually involved sales activities. Students felt that businesses often used deceptive techniques to make sales. For example, past customers were contacted under

the pretence of customer service, while in reality the only reason for the contact was to solicit new sales. Similarly, in some businesses sales people had high sales quotas to fill and customers were pushed hard to buy. Since most internships are held for a limited time only, students generally adapted to such situations by not following all the directions they were given. Those who did not believe that customers should be manipulated or pushed into buying, did not use hard sales techniques. Similarly, though their co-workers used deceitful techniques to contact customers, the students did not feel that they needed to be deceitful when they contacted clients. But, regardless of the action taken, students found themselves in a business environment they did not enjoy. They also noted that businesses with "pushy" salespeople or those that did not accord customers due respect, ended up losing customers and valued employees.

Training in ethical principles is especially useful in cases where there is no clear cut answer of what represents right and wrong. Interns are told that it is important to look for companies where the corporate climate supports values similar to theirs.

4. Company has no code of ethics, student has decision making power, observes others engaged in unethical behavior.

This situation does not occur very often. The only time student interns have real decision making power is when they are employed for the family business. It is impressive, however, how frequently students attempt to develop a code of ethics for the family business or they attempt to implement ethical decisions. In this category of internships we can see most vividly the effect of instruction in ethics. Students are able to justify the decision they make in terms of one or more ethics theories. Training in ethics gives them the ammunition they need to make ethical decisions.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The majority of students involved in internships face ethical dilemmas in their place of

employment. Unless an ethics component is built in the internship contract, it is possible to overlook the ethical problems students may be facing. A four step approach is recommended for marketing internships. Along with their other responsibilities for their internship, students are told that they must keep a log of their activities and concerns. At the end of the quarter they must write a paper analyzing the issues that occurred during the quarter from an ethical standpoint. Students are required to hold regular meetings with their faculty advisor and they are encouraged to access counselors in the career center and other interns when they need emotional support.

An analysis of the logs and papers on ethics submitted reveals that students are likely to encounter the most problems from an ethical standpoint when they are working in a low level position in companies without a code of ethics. Faculty advisors should work closely with students placed in such positions. From the student's standpoint, when they are confronted with an ethical dilemma, both action and inaction can have negative consequences. Students who take no action when they see others engaged in unethical behavior, may become cynical and accept unethical behavior as the status quo. Students who decide to take action and who confront those engaged in unethical behavior should be taught the skills necessary for undertaking such action. Internships provide students with an opportunity to practice the ethical decision making processes they learn in the classroom, while they can still ask for advice from their faculty advisors and the staff of career centers.

A broader question raised by this analysis, pertains to the position of student internships in the business curriculum. In schools where internships are not a required part of the business curriculum, enrollments for internships are limited. But, given the emphasis placed today on ethics instruction, internships provide an excellent opportunity to practice and reinforce what is learned in the classroom especially in the area of ethical decision making.

REFERENCES AVAILABLE UPON REQUEST