

Marketing: The “rebound” major

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Abstract

This qualitative research study examines the question of how and why undergraduate marketing students choose to major in marketing. In many respects, our findings echo previous research in this area. Career prospects, job security, preparation for entrepreneurship, and the opportunity to work with people, and be creative all ranked highly as factors considered by students in many studies including ours. However, since our study had students provide a narrative of the “path” they took to the marketing major, we were able to reexamine a phenomenon raised briefly in only one previous study. That is, the fact that so many marketing majors switched to marketing from another field that they had previously pursued. It appears that marketing students often chose marketing when “on the rebound” from another major that did not work out. In some cases, the initial field(s) of study were non-business and in other cases they were business majors such as accounting or finance. We close by postulating potential underlying reasons for this dynamic and suggest further research.

Introduction

There is a substantial body of research that examines the key factors at play as undergraduate students choose their major. Furthermore, previous studies have examined how business students chose their specific area of study (i.e., accounting, marketing, finance, etc.). For the moment, we will focus on these and a handful of studies that have explored why marketing majors chose marketing including Javier (2007), Pappu (2004), Roach (2012), and Strasser (2002).

As a group, these studies have used a survey instrument to ask undergraduate marketing majors to indicate what factors entered into the choice of major. Generally speaking, the data was collected and analyzed yielding an account of which factors were significant and which were not.

Not surprisingly, career opportunity and job security ranked highly in all the studies (Javier, 2007, Ozgur & Rogers, 2015, Pappu, 2004, Roach et al., 2012, and Strasser, et al., 2002). Marketing students specifically mentioned that they perceived marketing to be flexible in that it was applicable in different types of businesses. Javier (2007), Roach (2012), and Strasser (2002) also noted that respondents indicated that business and marketing studies would be helpful preparation for running their own businesses. Respondents in Roach (2012) and Strasser’s (2002) studies indicated that an intrinsic interest in their chosen field of study was an important consideration.

Marketing majors (Javier, 2007) found that quality of life and the opportunity to work with people, be creative, and work in advertising and public relations were important considerations in addition to the career opportunity considerations discussed above. Javier (2007) also mentioned that 54% of marketing majors had changed majors. That is, they had chosen a different major (often accounting or finance) and then later decided to change to marketing. He postulated that it was only after beginning university and being exposed to the discipline that they selected marketing. The study comments that “marketing is the invisible discipline”

counting on the internet and school counselors to expose students to the marketing field after they had begun college.

Method

An assignment requiring marketing students to write a three- to four-page paper on their path to the marketing major was developed and then assigned in three undergraduate marketing classes. The written assignment asked students to discuss, in narrative form, when and how they chose marketing as their major, what steps they followed in their decision making, what the key drivers were. The assignment was originally developed for and used in a Consumer Behavior (marketing core course) class. It was then used in a second Consumer Behavior (CB) class. Finally, it was used in a Marketing Strategy (marketing capstone course) class but with minor modifications – basically, defining or changing terminology that was specific to a consumer behavior class. A handful of papers in the Consumer Behavior classes were written by communications students taking the class; these were eliminated from the sample.

In terms of data analysis and interpretation, thematic analytic and code development procedures described by Boyatzis (1998) were used for the first Consumer Behavior class. Specifically, the raw information in the papers (data set) was outlined. Potential themes were then identified. From this, potential labels corresponding to the themes were developed. These labels (or codes) applied to the original Consumer Behavior class as well as the other CB class. Responses from the Marketing Strategy class are in the process of being analyzed.

Scoring and clustering the codes were used to provide the basis for analysis and formulating potential theories on what pathways the students used to select the marketing major and what the important considerations were.

Results

Basic statistics regarding our sample respondents are shown in Table 1. Please note that at this point we have analyzed the results from two classes. A third class is in the process of being analyzed.

Our qualitative analysis including the definition of the labels and the frequency that they appeared in the sample is summarized in Table 2.

To a great extent, the results are consistent with the prior research. In choosing marketing, students were attracted by the opportunity to be creative and to work with people; several students commented that they considered themselves to be a “people person.” Career opportunities also ranked highly with many commenting that marketing offered multiple career paths to choose from and that marketing was applicable in a wide variety of industries and types of companies.

At least half of the marketing students in our study mentioned that a friend or relative who was knowledgeable in marketing had been influential in the decision to choose marketing. A smaller number mentioned that they had received the support of their parents when they chose their marketing major. Many mentioned that they had considered accounting, finance and management as an alternative business major.

Many of our respondents also mentioned social media having influenced their decision to pursue marketing. Typically, they enjoyed social media and (correctly) believed it to be important to contemporary marketing.

Perhaps of greatest significance, is the fact that about half of the respondents had indicated that they had chosen another area of study and/or major prior to choosing marketing. In some cases, the students had selected a profession outside of business such as auto repair, art, non-profit work, teaching, music, cooking or psychology. Then, they discovered something about that particular profession – pay too low, minimal career opportunities, etc. – which caused them to search for a new field and that is when they discovered and chose marketing. In other cases, students might have chosen another business discipline, often accounting or finance, but then discovered that they were not a good match for the field. Perhaps they found these majors too quantitative or intrinsically not interesting. In either case, marketing was a major that these students chose while on the “rebound.”

Discussion

Let us focus on the question of why many marketing students (about half) come to the field only after pursuing another path. There are several possibilities; three will be discussed here. First, perhaps there is a lack of awareness of the field. Accountants and bookkeepers and manufacturing personnel frequently appear in modern media. Marketing professionals do not. So, if there are no marketing professionals in the household, how and where would a young adult gain exposure to the field? Secondly, if they do gain exposure to the world of marketing through the media, it is quite often as a negative depiction of sales. Finally, our research was done at a large state university with a large portion of “first in the family to attend college” students. Well-meaning parents may encourage their children to attend college and select a major that they perceive as serious and career-oriented. Within business, accounting and finance might meet the criteria, while we believe marketing might be less likely to do so.

We believe that the above question merits further study. A greater understanding should allow marketing programs to be more effective in recruiting and meeting the needs of its students.

References

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Table 1 – Basic Statistics

NUMBER OF STUDENTS				
A	34			
B	35			
Total	69			
WHAT IS YOUR CONCENTRATION?				
	A	B	Total	Percentage
Marketing	29	32	61	92%
Marketing and finance	1	0	1	2%
Marketing and E & T	3	1	4	6%
Marketing and ISDS	1	1	0	0%
Marketing and HR	0	1	0	0%
Total	34	35	66	100%

STATUS				
Senior	31	23	54	78%
Junior	2	12	14	20%
Sophomore	0	0	0	0%
Freshman	0	0	0	0%
Other	0	0	0	0%
No response	1	0	1	1%
Total	34	35	69	100%
WHEN DID YOU CHOSE YOUR MAJOR?				
Senior	2	0	2	3%
Junior	16	7	23	33%
Sophomore (or CC)	11	9	20	29%
Freshman (or CC)	3	3	6	9%
Community college	0	7	7	10%
High School	2	8	10	14%

No response	0	1	1	1%
Total	34	35	69	100%

Table 2 – Summary of Coding/Labels

Sample size

- 34 respondents in class A (Consumer Behavior class)
- 35 respondents in class B (Consumer Behavior class)
- Responses from third class in the process of being analyzed

Each student response assigned a number. When response included a particular label, then that student's number was included in table below. For example, student #3 in class A indicated that he/she chose business and then later decided to concentrate on marketing. So, this student was indicated in table below as A3 under the corresponding label.

Area	Label	Definition	Examples	Respondents Who Matched Label
Decision process	Business then marketing	Considered several areas to study. Decided on business and then subsequently chose marketing.	· Mentions	A1, A2, A3, A4, A5, A6, A15, A25, A35, B8, B13, B33, B36, B19
Decision process	Considered accounting and finance or management	Seriously considered accounting and finance, often because of perceived job security, earnings potential.	· Mentions	A2, A8, A10, A12, A15, A22, A26, A30, B2, B4, B36, B21, B26, B38

Decision process	Considered/selected “unrelated” field prior to choosing marketing	Examples mentioned: auto mechanic, teacher, art, musician, psychology, high school coach, vet, cook, biology, communications, non-profit, journalism, communications, fashion.	· Mentions	A1, A5, A10, A14, A17, A21, A31, A33, B20, B24, B37, B12, B30, B4, B7, B32, B8, B11, B6, B22, B15
Decision process	Marketing was first or second choice as potential area of study “from the beginning”			A6, A18, A23, A27, B12, B16, B17, B18, B12, B16, B17, B18
Influence	Friend or relative in marketing	Friend or family member is familiar with marketing and recommends the profession.	· Close relative or friend recommends marketing and/or perhaps exposes student to the area.	A1, A3, A4, A5, A5, A7, A12, A14, A15, A16, A22, A25, A26, A29, A34, B3, B2, B4, B7, B8, B12, B18, B19, B20, B21, B25, B30
Influence	Parents	Parent recommends marketing and/or supports student’s decision to explore or pursue marketing.	· Parents offer positive reinforcement for student’s decision to explore marketing.	A2, A10, A13, A22, A24, A31, A32, A35, B5, B6, B10, B13, B27, B32, B31, B33

Influence	Principles (351)	Experience in Principles of Marketing was instrumental in decision to concentrate in marketing.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Mentions that Principles of Marketing was instrumental in decision to concentrate in marketing. 	A5, A8, A24, B28, B32
Influence	Social media	Enjoys using social media, believes that social media is an important component of marketing.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · States that s/he enjoys and uses social media. · States that social media is an important or large component of marketing. 	A1, A2, A4, A7, A9 A11, A15, A16, A18, A27, A28, A34
Personality	Creativity	Seeks creativity in area of study and career; “idea person.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Describes oneself as creative. · States that s/he sought creativity when choosing major or career. · Wants to make a difference in people’s live. 	A1, A7, A15, A16, A27, A30, A32, B4, B6, B8, B18, B31, B33, B35, B36
Personality	People person	Person enjoys working directly with other people. Seeks this in social life, studies and profession.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Describes him/herself as extroverted or a “people person.” Student believes s/he has strong emotional intelligence. 	A3, A6, A9, A10, A15, A17, A25, A26, A29, A30, A31, A32, A33, A35, B2, B4, B7, B8, B10, B13, B14, B17, B25 B26

Seeks	Fun	Seeks fun in work and likely undergraduate studies as well. Perceives marketing as a fun area to work in.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Seeks fun in work or studies. · Perceives marketing as a fun area (or implied). 	A4, A7, A18, A20, A35, B5, B6, B10, B31
Seeks	Marketing offers multiple career paths	Believes that marketing offers many job options – variety of industries, types of companies, etc. Therefore, this will always be demand for marketing professionals and this leads to job security.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · States that many different types of companies and organizations need marketing and this leads to job security. · Many paths also sound inherently interesting and appealing. 	A3, A4, A5, A7, A11, A12, A14, A15, A17, A23, A25, A29, B5, B6, B10, B15, B12, B13, B18, B19, B21, B22, B30, B33, B36, B39
Seeks	No math please	Wanted to stay away from areas of study or professional work that required significant skills in working with numbers.		A12, A 14, A31, A32