

AN ASSESSMENT OF STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF MARKETING PROFESSORS' OFFICE

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ABSTRACT

How educators organize and maintain their offices has an impact on what that environment means to students. If educators knew what the environment meant to students, they might be able to change aspects of the office in order to obtain a more favorable impression from the students. We present a study that uses a thought listing method for assessing the meaning of a professor's office. Some implications are then given on what a marketing professor might change in his office environment in order to be considered more of an "ideal" marketing educator.

Most students value interaction with their instructor, and believe personal interaction adds to the quality of teaching. This interaction takes place not only in the classroom, but also in the professor's office. The students' perception of the professor's office environment is likely to influence the students' perception of the quality of education they are receiving. For example, if the office environment creates a negative impression of the professor, then the environment could be counter-productive to the overall effort of the professor in his/her effort to provide quality education. How student perception of the marketing professor's office relates to student perception of the professor and his or her character and professional abilities will be the focus of this paper. First the paper will review methodology used in environmental psychology relevant to this topic. Then a study that illustrates a method of measuring the environmental meaning of a professor's office will be described (for further detail about this method, see Ward, Bitner, and Gossett 1989). Finally the results of the study will be presented including a few examples of the associations generated by the stimuli, followed by some interesting implications of the research for marketing educators.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

There are many ways to evaluate the psychology of the environment. Use of the semantic differential (Osgood 1957) is considered one of the conventional approaches to studying the meaning of the environment. With this

approach, the subjects are asked to describe a stimulus by means of ratings on a given set of bipolar adjectives. Another approach used by Ward and Russell (1981) is the multi-dimensional scaling of similarity judgements. Multi-dimensional scaling asks the subject to compare how similar two stimuli are to each other and to rate that similarity on a numerical scale provided by the researcher (Aaker and Day 1980). Although both methods are means of studying psychological meaning (Szalay and Deese 1978), a main limitation of both methods is that they assume that the researcher knows all the dimensions that a subject would use to perceive or evaluate an object. This forces the subject to rate the stimuli on a given scale and thus restricts the range of responses by the subject. Szalay and Deese (1978) present a method that does not restrict the range of responses that a subject can make about a stimulus. The subject is presented with a stimulus and then told to use their own words to list all words or phrases that come to mind about the stimulus. The use of content analysis is then used to categorize the associations into themes based on the meaning of each association. This type of analysis reveals an understanding of the stimuli at a deeper level than the conventional methods mentioned. This methodology was used in the research for this paper and is discussed in the methodology section.

Previous research of professor's offices was conducted by Campbell (1979). In this experiment he manipulated the furniture arrangement, the presence of living things, aesthetic objects, and neatness in faculty offices and then had students rate slides of these offices on a 9-point bipolar scale. The results of the study indicated that the messiness of a professor's office was likely to elicit a negative rating toward the professor and the professor was perceived to be far too rushed and haphazard when the office was messy than when the office was shown in a tidy condition. The research presented here allows the subjects to free-associate to the stimuli of the office environment rather than restricting them to pre-determined bi-polar scales.

METHODOLOGY

The instrument used asked the students to imagine an ideal, a typical, and the worst possible marketing professor. The ideal professor was described as:

"Think of an ideal professor to take a marketing class from. By ideal, I don't necessarily mean a specific person that you know. I mean your idea of the best possible professor-- the ideal professor- to take a marketing class from. Now imagine looking into that ideal professor's office."

Each page of the instrument had instructions similar to these:

"Don't list what you see in the ideal professor's office. Instead list the words or phrases you associate with what is in the ideal professor's office."

The decorations _____
The decorations _____

The students provided protocols to the typical, the ideal, and then the worst professor (in that order of presentation) on each of five stimulus words or phrases. They were in order: "The professor's overall office", "The decorations", "How organized the office is", "What's on the desk", and "The books you see". This produced 15 different word association tasks for each student. (For purposes of this study, responses associated with the typical professors' office will not be reported.)

The sample consisted of 61 students enrolled in marketing classes at a major southwestern university. Five of the subjects' instruments were discarded because of failure by the students to follow the directions given, resulting in 56 usable instruments.

This paper utilizes a coding scheme developed and used by Ward, Bitner, and Gossett (1989). This coding system was used to understand the meaning of the service environment. Each association listed was coded into the category that best represented the meaning of the response. The results were then tabulated and the frequencies of those responses are presented in Table 1. The sample of 56 students responded with 4337 words or phrases on the 15 different word association tasks (Data from 15 of these students were presented in Ward, Bitner, & Gossett 1989). Only 194 of the associations were not assignable to a specific category. Thus, over 95 percent of the associations were categorized to a specific theme. There were 322 responses that mentioned items that the students perceived in the office, such as pencils, pens, paper, that

suggested a means of doing work. These associations were not interpretable by the researchers and were not used in the current analysis. This left 3974 usable responses.

RESULTS

The associations indicate that the students were willing to infer a professor's ability, attitude toward students, work habits, and other personal traits merely from the physical appearance of the office.

The results will be presented by contrasting the associations to the ideal versus the worst professor's office. The results will be discussed in the order in which the themes most often appeared across aspects of the professor's office. For example, organization of the office (1234) (numbers in parentheses represent number of associations), followed by overall ambiance of the office (808), ability/knowledge (714), attitude toward the student (389), personal traits (375), and work habits (301).

Organization

The most salient theme appeared to be how well the office or various aspects of the office was organized or not. Looking at the summary across all five probes, the ideal professor is clearly perceived to be more organized (234) than disorganized (15) and the worst professor is perceived to be more disorganized (256) than organized (18).

When prompted to think about the ideal professor's office, the subjects listed specific associations such as "things in their place" and "knows where everything is." The decorations were said to "fit together" and be "matching." The desktop had "a spot for everything" and "everything in its place." Books were "sorted neatly" and "categorized". The overall organization was said to have "nothing out-of-place" and be "engineered."

When asked to think about the the worst professor's office, associations such as "confusion", "chaos", and "disorder" were listed most often. The decorations were "not well-placed" and "disarranged". The desktop was in "general confusion", and a "free-for-all." The books were "carelessly strewn about." The overall organization was "discombobulated", and "reminiscent of nuclear holocaust."

The second set of themes that emerged under the heading of organization was the clean/dirty theme. For the ideal professor there were 117 responses coded as clean and only 9 responses coded as dirty. The worst professor had only 10 responses coded clean and 225 coded into the dirty category. The ideal professor's overall office was said to be "clean" and with "shiny windows." The decorations were "tidy" and with "no fingerprints." The desktop was "spotless" and with "no food or drinks." The books were "undusty". The overall organization was reported as "neat". The worst professor's office was considered a "disaster area" with "spilled coffee". The decorations were "dusty" and "messy". The desk was depicted as "sloppy" and a "trashy mess". The books were described as "full of dust". The overall organization was characterized as "a pig sty".

Overall Environmental Ambiance of Office

The next most salient theme was the overall environmental ambiance of the office. The ideal professor was said to be in a bright office (16) more so than in a dark office (3), while the worst professor's office was considered dark (26) rather than bright (2). A bright environment was "well-lighted", "bright", and "cheery." A dark environment was "dark", "dark colors", "darkness", and "dreary."

The ideal professor's office was considered more open and spacious (32) than cramped and crowded (3), while the worst professor's office was more cramped and crowded (44) than an open and spacious environment (5). An open and spacious office was considered "roomy", and "several open windows." A cramped and crowded office was considered "clostrophobic", "isolated", "no privacy", "lousy view", and "noisy".

The ideal professor was depicted to have more of a colorful office (38) than a drab office (5), and the worst professors' office was depicted to have more of a drab office (14) than a colorful office. A colorful office was considered to have "eye pleasing colors", and "prints with a lot of color." The drab office was "colorless" and "lacking color."

The ideal professor's office tended to elicit more associations of nice decor (46) than bad decor (4). The worst professor's office elicited more associations that indicated bad decor (101) than nice decor (2). Nice decor was generally depicted as "expensive looking (decorations)", "expensive artwork", and "wood"

furniture. Bad decor was represented by such responses as "plastic" and "shabby" furniture, and "in disrepair."

The ideal professor's office elicited associations that indicated more of a personal nature (53) than impersonal associations(4), and the worst professor elicited more impersonal responses (31) than personal responses (2). Examples of a personable professor were "candid family photos", and "photo of dog." An impersonal response was "no family pictures".

The ideal professor's office elicited 35 responses that indicated the office was inviting to the student and zero uninviting responses, while the worst professor elicited 20 uninviting responses and zero inviting responses. Inviting responses included "cozy", "says come in", "open door", and "plenty of chairs to sit in," and uninviting responses were "non-user friendly", "disarray of furniture", and "black hole."

In summary, it is clear that the ideal professor's office is considered a bright, spacious, colorful space with nice decor, and is personal and inviting, while the worst professor's office is considered one that is dark, cramped, impersonal, and uninviting for the student.

Ability/Knowledge

The next theme was how well the office or various aspects of the office projected a perception of the ability or knowledge of the professor.

The ideal professor is perceived to be more wise (85) than not wise (1), more professional (59) than not professional (2), more current (68) than not current (3), and more wide in scope of knowledge and thought processes (44) than narrow in scope (1). The worst professor is perceived to be more not wise (40) than wise (17), more not professional (31) than professional (4), more not current (50) than current (8), and more narrow in scope (19) than wide in scope (1). Of the 57 responses that indicated some type of award, the ideal professor elicited 30 associations, and the worst professor elicited 4 associations.

When asked about the ideal professor's overall office, the students responded almost exclusively

with associations that indicated that the professor was knowledgeable such as "a source of information", and "computer capable." The decorations and the desktop were said to be a "display of knowledge," and the books were "thick" and for "continued growth." The awards for this professor were "framed diploma" and "has degree on the wall". The worst professor's office elicited not professional responses such as "unrelated to marketing" and "un-professionalism".

The ideal professor was considered to be either up-to-date or current in their image and knowledge by such responses as "cutting edge" and "Wall Street Journal", while the worst professor's office elicited terms such as "obsolescence", "stuck-in-a-rut", and "outdated text."

Attitude Toward the Student

The ideal professor was more helpful/caring (139) than unhelpful/uncaring (9), while the worst professor was considered more unhelpful/uncaring (134) than helpful/caring (6). A helpful and caring attitude is exemplified by such associations as "borrowable (books)", and "convenient office hours". Examples of an unhelpful/uncaring response were "door closed (and) locked", "never there during office hours", and "7 am office hours."

Personal Traits

The ideal professor was considered easy going in nature (25) rather than anxious (3), while the worst professor was considered anxious (25) rather than easy going (3). Examples of an easy going nature were "soothing (decorations)" and "a non-confrontational office," and of an anxious nature were "nervous toys", and decorations that were "too nervous".

The ideal professor was considered more interesting (50), such as the decorations being "interesting in subject matter", and "thought provoking", than boring (5). The worst professor was considered more boring (58), such as the decorations being "monotone" and "dull," than interesting (2).

The ideal professor office was considered more family oriented (34), with responses such as "family reminder" and "family photos" on the desktop, than not family oriented (0). Even the worst professor was more family oriented (6) than not family oriented (4).

In summary, the ideal professor's office is one that emits personal traits that would indicate an easy going nature, that he/she is interesting and thought provoking,

and has a strong family interest. The worst professor's office is considered one that has cues considered anxious and boring.

Work Habits

These associations indicated that the students had a tendency to infer the professor's work habits from cues that were in his or her office. The ideal professor's office was considered more of a place for the professor to be industrious and to get work done (90) than a place to avoid work (13), while the worst professor's office was not considered a good workspace and more of a place for work avoidance (71) than a place for work to get done (12). Some of the industrious associations were "no student's work- they have all been handed back", and "opened, well-used books," while work avoidance responses were "(books) unrelated to work", "play toys", "food stuff on desk", and "wasted time."

IMPLICATIONS

This study should give professors some insight into how their offices influence their evaluation by students outside the classroom. This research does not elicit proscriptive dimensions for professors to arrange and decorate their office. But the results clearly indicate what is salient in the mind of students when they think of the ideal marketing professor or the worst marketing professor.

Assuming that a professor would want to be perceived more as an "ideal" than the "worst" marketing professor, then this research indicates the environmental cues associated with each prototype, and thus what to strive for and avoid in an office environment. Students may infer whether the professor is organized by environmental cues such as having decorations that seem to fit together, having things in there place, and by having the books well arranged. Students may also infer whether a professor is organized by how clean the environment is. The ideal professor is perceived to have an office with shiny windows, a clean, unmusty smell, and no food stains on the polished desktop. The students think of the ideal professor as being knowledgeable when they see a computer on his desk, complex looking books on the bookshelf, and framed diplomas on the wall. They perceive the professor as up-to-date with trends and on the cutting edge of knowledge if they see current, up-to-

TABLE 1

FREQUENCY OF ASSOCIATIONS RELATED TO THEMES
CATEGORIZED BY TYPE OF PROFESSOR AND ASPECT OF OFFICE

Themes	Total Across All Probes			Personal Traits	Ideal	Op	Typ
Organization	Ideal	Op	Typ				
organized	234	18	117	easy going	25	3	12
disorganized	15	256	110	anxious	3	29	7
clean	117	10	47	humorous	25	1	13
dirty	9	225	76	not humorous	1	7	2
Total	375	509	350	interesting	54	2	15
				boring	5	62	29
				family oriented	34	6	32
				not family	0	4	1
				Total	149	114	112
Overall Ambiance of Office				Attitude Toward Students			
bright	16	2	12	helpful	139	6	61
dark	3	26	9	unhelpful	9	134	40
open	32	5	8	Total	148	140	101
cramped/crowded	3	44	34	Ability/Knowledge			
colorful	38	1	21	wise	85	17	73
drab	5	14	13	not wise	1	40	17
nice decor	46	4	9	awards	30	4	23
plain decor	45	39	54	professional	59	4	43
bad decor	2	101	25	not profess.	2	31	8
personal	53	4	31	current	68	8	36
impersonal	2	31	11	not current	3	50	26
inviting	35	0	9	wide	44	1	10
uninviting	0	20	1	not wide	1	19	11
Total	280	291	237	Total	293	174	247
Work Habits				Column Totals	1469	1343	1331
industrious	90	12	87	Grand Total			3974
not indust.	13	71	28				
Total	103	83	115				

date publications and books, and the Wall Street Journal on the desk. The overall ambiance of the ideal professor's office is perceived to be a colorful, well-lit, open and spacious environment with windows, and expensive looking artwork. The ideal professor's office is perceived to be personable and have a welcoming ambiance if a photo of a family member or a photo of the professor's dog is on the desk top or the wall, and if the door to the office is open. Students may infer whether the ideal professor is industrious by environmental cues such as a desktop that is clear of past-due student work and has no empty food containers. The ideal professor may be perceived as easy going if the decorations are soothing and not too nervous. He might be perceived as interesting if the decorations in the office are imaginative and thought provoking. The students perceive the ideal professor as a professional and they expect the environment to reflect this professionalism. The ideal professor is also imagined as a helpful and caring individual if he has books with good examples he is willing to share with the student, and has a reasonable set of office hours, and is in the office and available to the student during those office hours.

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