

ABSTRACT

ETHICAL ORIENTATION OF MARKETING STUDENTS, INSTRUCTORS, AND PRACTITIONERS

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The ethics of business practitioners currently has primacy as a consequence of recent disclosures of business bribes, illegal political contributions, insider trading on Wall Street, and conflicts of interest in business and government. Marketing practitioners (business people whose primary job focuses on marketing functions) are frequently singled out by the media as unethical because of such alleged practices as selling inferior products, inaccurate labeling, deceptive packaging, and misleading advertising (Fritzche and Becker 1982).

The propensity for unethical conduct among some marketing practitioners appears to be the consequence of both external and internal forces. External forces include the competitive free enterprise system which frequently idolizes short-term profits. Internally, companies may pressure marketing managers to compromise their personal ethics to achieve positive bottom line results.

Presumably, external and internal forces interfere with personal ethics and the desire of individuals to act ethically. In addition, college business curricula have traditionally placed business ethics on the back burner, accentuating quantitative techniques and scientific procedures instead (Boyer 1986).

This study examined the level of acceptance of questionable marketing practices by marketing students, marketing instructors, and marketing practitioners. An instrument consisting of forty questionable marketing practices was administered to these groups to assess their ethical orientation. Scores for 178 beginning marketing college students, 170 advanced marketing college students, 40 marketing instructors, and 141 marketing practitioners were tabulated.

The findings of this study demonstrate that the ethical orientation of different marketing disposed groups in different situations are significantly different. The research provided evidence that advanced marketing students were more accepting of questionable marketing practices than beginning marketing students. Marketing instructors and marketing practitioners shared a similar ethical orientation; both groups were more accepting of questionable marketing practices than the students.

The results of this research suggest that the ethical orientation of marketing students, practitioners, and instructors may be dependent on situational perspectives: proximity to business practice, years of business experience, and gender. Surprisingly, the taking of an

ethics course did not contribute to a positive ethical orientation.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study have implications in regard to the role that marketing education should play in the relationship between students and their social environment--specifically in students' academic experience. A reassessment of the teaching of marketing ethics in marketing courses is necessary. This teaching might include the writing, communicating, and creation of company policy regarding ethics. Situational role playing would undoubtedly sensitize students to the realities of marketing ethics.

Since females were found to be less accepting of questionable marketing practices, it may be helpful if they were encouraged to share their ethical reasoning in the classroom environment. Females represent the majority of marketing majors; marketing educators should encourage them to share their ethical beliefs, values, and opinions.

It would be desirable to extend the breadth of this research. For example, a longitudinal study could track the same group of individuals over a six- to eight-year period as they develop from beginning marketing students to advanced marketing students to marketing practitioners.

REFERENCES

- Boyer, E. L. (1986), College: The Undergraduate Experience in America, New York: Harper Row.
- Fritzche, D. J., and Becker (1982), "Business Ethics of the Future," Journal of Marketing Education, 4 (Fall), 2-7.

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