

DEVELOPING A STUDENT ORIENTATION: THE USE OF A FIRST DAY SURVEY

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ABSTRACT

Market and customer orientation are well-known terms to any marketing professor. However, the application of such concepts in the classroom is not always straightforward. At a time when most marketing educators recognize the changing needs of their students, new tools to adapt our teaching methods and techniques to them are called for. This paper discusses the use of a first day survey to assess students' needs, wants, and expectations regarding several aspects of a marketing course and presents ways to develop a student-oriented format for the class.

WHAT DOES A STUDENT-ORIENTATION MEAN?

Since the advent of the "new marketing concept," customer orientation has become the best tool to gain and retain customers. Customer orientation, one of the components of market orientation, refers to the process of generating and disseminating market intelligence for the purpose of creating superior consumer value (Kohli and Jaworski 1990). In a business context, the construct of customer orientation captures the company's level of commitment and orientation to serving customers' needs, the fact that business objectives are driven primarily by customer satisfaction, and the underlying belief that the company can generate greater value for its customers. Developing a customer orientation in the business world thus involves knowing and understanding the customers' stated needs and implied expectations, orienting organizational activities to satisfy such needs and expectations, and assessing customer satisfaction.

The application of the customer orientation concept to education is not new. In fact, discussions of customer-focused educational systems abound. However, as Mukherjee (1995) pointed out, applying the customer orientation concept to educational system is complex as there are many layers of providers and customers. As a means of streamlining the line of reasoning of the paper, we focus here on students as customers, view the instructor of a specific course as the supplier, and propose means by which the instructor can cater his/her teaching style and techniques to his/her students.

Most educators recognize the need for them to adapt to environmental changes (Ferrell 1995) and to changes in the nature of students and students' expectations for their education. This brings the question of how educators should assess their students' needs so that they can adjust accordingly. The purpose of this paper is to present a way to adopt the business notion of customer orientation in a classroom environment and to provide a simple tool for educators who wish to implement a student orientation in their classroom. Specifically, the paper discusses the use of a first day survey to identify students' needs and expectations with regards to the course and to better know and understand the students.

METHODOLOGY

A two-page survey was administered to all students of two sections of an undergraduate Consumer Behavior class (N=104) on the first day of the semester. The students were informed that the format of the class had been kept flexible so as to accommodate their needs and that the purpose of the survey was to gather information about their preferences for different class formats, exam formats, studying habits, etc.

The survey was designed to both address class-specific issues and gather more personal information about the students in an attempt to develop an appreciation of each student's background. As listed in Table 1, a series of 5-point Likert scales aimed at gathering students' attitudes toward different class and exam formats, their studying habits, and their level of experience with different assignments. Another set of questions addressed scheduling issues, such as the convenience of the scheduled office hours and the students' personal schedules (if they worked and, if so, how many hours per week and what their job was, whether they had children, how many credit hours they were registered for that semester, and, what, if any, other marketing courses they were taking). Since the course called for many web-based assignments, email communications, and made extensive use of the course's website for posting lecture notes, sample exam questions, and grades, a section of the survey included questions on the students' ease of access to a computer and the

25% of the surveyed students worked between 25 and 30 hours per week and another 25% over 30 hours. This, of course, creates severe time constraints for the students that educators must recognize and work with.

Comments to the two open-ended questions were content-analyzed so as to paint a picture of the "ideal" professor. Many of the comments had to do, again, with class format. Students like organization, thoroughness, clarity, attention to details, and good communication skills. Other qualities include fair, knowledgeable, "up to date with current trends," personable, accessible and available to the students, someone who listens, who likes what he/she teaches and is enthusiastic about the materials. The professor must "keep the students interested" and "motivate them to learn." From a human standpoint, the ideal professor is someone who "wants to see their students succeed in life," "someone who can relate to the students," as well as someone who shows respect for the students.

In order to be able to relate to the students, simple survey questions such as where the students are from, where they work, what type of job they might want once they graduate, the magazines they read, television programs they watch, or associations students they belong to can help shed light into the students' lives and allow the educator to use more pertinent examples as illustrations for marketing concepts.

Most importantly, a good professor was identified as one "who listens to the feedback of the students," who is "open to new things," and who is "willing to work with the students to help them get the most out of the class." The following comment captures the student orientation as seen from the students' perspective: "a good professor makes his course appreciated by the student."

DISCUSSION: HOW TO USE THIS INFORMATION

Collecting survey information from the students on the first day of class will help develop a student orientation only if it is used to adapt the class curriculum to the students' needs and expectations as they were expressed in the survey. Thus, the real challenge is to use the knowledge and understanding of the students to put in place a student-oriented course, much as market intelligence is used to create superior consumer value.

While some of the information from the first day survey is relatively easy to implement, such as with

preferences regarding the exam format, other outcomes may entail that adjustments be made to the teaching techniques used in class, possibly to the syllabus, and sometimes, require that the instructor rethink his / her teaching philosophy.

As was discussed in the previous section, the results confirm previous findings (e.g., Smart et al. 1999) that the traditional classroom model has given way to a model that emphasizes active learning. Such emphasis can be achieved by shortening lectures to make room for active learning techniques from which to choose (Shakarian 1995) such as experiential learning exercises, relevant guest speakers, and case discussions. Videos can be used to capture the students' attention but also to generate classroom discussions. Interestingly, experiential activities are not only favored by the students, their effectiveness in terms of learning has also been demonstrated (Hamer 2000).

Other findings related to students' level of experience with different assignments might involve scheduling several preparatory sessions. For instance, since many students reported not being very familiar with the library system, a workshop with a business librarian was scheduled. Similarly, to address students' lack of experience with conducting case studies, a special training session was organized with a practice case analysis.

Scheduling and other personal issues that students may indicate on the survey could point to needed adjustments in the office hours. Often times, professors schedule their office hours for their own convenience but overlook the fact that these may not coincide with the students' availability. Electronic means of communications are providing an easy remedy for this by allowing "virtual" office hours to be held. This is especially useful since, of the 32.7% of students who indicated that the office hours were not convenient, most could not suggest a better time, as their class and work schedules took up most of their "free" time.

Sometimes, the first day survey results may require that the instructor rethink his/her teaching philosophy. As discussed by Smart et al. (1999), the traditional "teacher" role of educators has given way to "learning facilitator" roles. As indicated in the survey, the students view a good professor as someone who can make the class interesting, fun, and interactive by incorporating many teaching methods. Therefore, embracing a student-oriented approach to teaching would stipulate that the instructor be ready and willing to improve in those areas.

LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations. First, the questions addressed evaluations of different aspects of class and thus may not reflect the actual effectiveness of each technique. This might explain the difference between the results of this survey and that conducted by Merritt (1998), which focused on "what works" for the students as opposed to what they "prefer." Her finding that students felt they learned more from lectures than from videos or guest speakers does not map on to the students' stated preferences in this study. This discrepancy may be attributed to the affective (liking) versus cognitive (learning) nature of the questions used in the two studies and illustrates the need to balance student tastes and preferences with learning outcomes of the course when developing a student orientation. Care must be taken to ensure that the student orientation does not interfere with the course's learning objectives. The key to making the student orientation a success is to find a good balance between adapting to the students' needs and covering the materials.

A second limitation of this study is that several potential moderating variables, such as learning style and level of skills, were not measured. Learning style has been shown to affect student preferences for different class activities (Frontczak and Rivale 1991) and thus may have affected the responses in this survey. Similarly, Merritt (1998) showed that the level of skills affected students' perceptions of the effectiveness of different class activities such as lectures or cases and thus may also moderate students' preferences for these techniques.

CONCLUSION

Although most educators recognize the need to adapt to continuous changes in the environment and in students' needs and expectations (Smart et al. 1999), doing so is challenging. This paper has presented the use of a first day survey to demonstrate the benefits of developing a student orientation. The benefits of a student orientation extend beyond satisfying the students. Much as customer orientation has been shown to lead to product innovation (Lukas and Ferrell 2000), student-generated insights have the potential to lead to novel teaching methods.

On a final note, it must be noted that developing a student orientation can only be successful within a teaching philosophy of continuous improvement. Developing and successfully implementing a student

orientation requires a climate of continuous learning, one in which educators are consistently striving to balance between meeting changing student needs and expectations and attaining the learning objectives they set for their classes. Learning is not static and implementing means to assess and adapt to student expectations must be dynamic. Students' needs change constantly. As new generations reach college-age, educators must stay in touch with their needs and be adaptive and willing to continually modify their teaching styles and methods to their ever-changing customers.

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