

IS MARKETING EDUCATION “PRODUCING” THE RIGHT PRODUCT (STUDENT) FOR TODAY’S JOB MARKET? MAYBE

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ABSTRACT

Marketing educators have a history of studying and writing about the types of knowledge and skills sought by those who employ our graduates. The purpose of this paper is to present empirical data that adds to this literature by highlighting how and where today’s marketing curricula appears and does not appear to produce marketing graduates capable of meeting the needs of employers seeking both entry and advanced-level marketing employees. The study’s findings reiterate marketing education’s need to carefully balance its emphasis on teaching students marketing knowledge or content versus developing student skill sets.

MAIN STUDY OBJECTIVE

The main study objective is to compare and contrast the most recent marketing job requirements identified in the Schlee (2009) study with what today’s undergraduate marketing curricula are requiring their undergraduate students to know (i.e., content) and/or be able to do (i.e., skills). The Schlee study is used as the benchmark as it provides a most recent and valid employer view on the characteristics they want to see in our graduates as it analyzed Monster.com marketing position advertisements. The Schlee findings, combined with this empirical study’s identification of learning outcomes stressed by today’s marketing education curricula, allows us to reflect on how in tune our “products” (graduates) are with their market (jobs). If some skills and knowledge areas are not attended to enough by our curricula, then changes may need to be considered. On the other hand, if some are receiving too much attention, perhaps efforts should be scaled back.

MEASURING CURRENT MARKETING CURRICULA EMPHASIS

Four steps were undertaken to address the study’s overall objective. The first step involved taking the 28 desired characteristics found in the Schlee (2009) study and adapting it to create a measurement instrument to be used with marketing educator respondents to elicit information on the learning outcomes stressed by their undergraduate

marketing degree programs. The second step involved identifying and collecting this information from those marketing educators with program oversight responsibility. The third step involved recording, organizing, and reporting any found similarities and differences between (i.e., any gaps) characteristics sought by employers and those characteristics believed to be delivered by undergraduate marketing degree programs. The fourth step was drawing recommendations for marketing educators.

The measurement instrument involved adapting the 28 desired employee characteristics reported by Schlee (2009). First, one of that study’s original three categories of characteristics (marketing knowledge) was split into two categories (broad marketing knowledge and specific marketing knowledge) to more closely align with typical marketing curricula designations. This move was also undertaken because prior research indicated that broad marketing knowledge appears to be most important for advanced-level marketing positions. Second, one of the Schlee study’s characteristics (merchandising) was dropped as it was rarely found in job advertisements and it appeared unique to retail sector positions. Third, five additional characteristics were added to create a total of 32: marketing and sustainability, buyer behavior, problem solving and critical thinking, creativity and innovation, and using social media/networking tools. A recent article by Wilhelm and Bridges (2008) provides strong arguments for the inclusion of marketing and sustainability into today’s marketing curricula. Buyer behavior was added as it was known to be a required course for most marketing degree programs. Three new meta skills were added as recent marketing education literature has discussed their importance to our educational efforts. For example, Celuch, Black, and Warthan (2009) note the importance of critical thinking, Diamond, Koernig, and Iqbal (2008) reiterate the importance of problem solving, and Titus (2007) stresses the importance of creativity. Social media and network marketing tools were added in recognition of their growing importance to and prevalence in contemporary marketing.

Sample Frame

U.S.-based marketing educators (n=644) selected for the empirical study were identified by searching websites of four-year schools identified as awarding undergraduate business programs by a 2008 *U.S. News & World Report* special issue on higher education. An Internet search identified some marketing educators (n=115) who appeared to have marketing curricula oversight responsibilities at higher education institutions located in Australia, Europe, and New Zealand.

Those who received an e-mail invitation (n=714) and went to the survey link (n=107) were first asked a screening question to determine if their institution offered an undergraduate marketing degree program. If "yes," they were asked to indicate the degree of emphasis their marketing program placed on the 32 potential characteristics discussed above by indicating a strong, moderate, some, very little, and no level of emphasis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Some 13 survey respondents did not have an undergraduate marketing degree program and were eliminated from further analysis. After eliminating another six response sets considered to have significant question response omissions from further analysis, the final number of response sets available for further analysis was 88 with 60 of these programs being AACSB accredited.

Survey results show that today's marketing curricula places significant emphases on traditional marketing knowledge areas such as strategy, segmentation, positioning, planning, and brand management. Today's marketing curricula places much less emphasis on supply chain management, business intelligence, and sustainability. The most frequently required specific marketing knowledge areas include buyer behavior, marketing research, promotion and advertising, and global marketing. Today's marketing curricula place much less emphasis on the specific knowledge areas of pricing, public relations, forecasting/budgeting, direct/interactive marketing, and Internet marketing. Considerable attention is paid to both oral and written communications, teamwork, and problem-solving skills. Relatively less attention is being paid to time management, attention to detail, and creativity/innovation skills. When it comes to technical skills, marketing curricula tends to mostly emphasize MS Office skills and this is distantly followed by statistical software and Internet marketing tool skills. The least amount of emphasis is on social media and networking tool skills.

Findings Versus Schlee Study

When contrasting the current study with the earlier Schlee study, marketing curricula appears to place significantly more emphasis on the traditional marketing knowledge areas than do those employers seeking entry-level employees. Desired marketing knowledge areas are more often stated in job postings for advanced-level marketing positions. Today's marketing curricula places much less emphasis on supply chain management, business intelligence, and sustainability, but none of these three knowledge areas are found to be high on the employers' list of desired characteristics.

The most frequently required specific marketing knowledge areas advertised by employers seeking entry-level employees are: personal selling, promotion and advertising, and Internet marketing. Those employers seeking advanced-level employees place even more emphasis on Internet marketing, promotion/advertising, and sales management. Logically, advanced-level positions less often require personal selling knowledge. Overall, employers do not place as much emphasis on several specific marketing knowledge areas (e.g., buyer behavior, customer relationship marketing, and marketing research) as is emphasized by today's marketing curricula.

Marketing curricula does place heavy emphasis on three meta skills also highly valued by employers: oral and written communications and teamwork. In contrast, marketing curricula places heavy emphasis on the following meta skills not so highly valued by employers: problem solving, critical thinking, and creativity/innovation. Employers hiring both entry and advanced-level employees highly value the ability to use Microsoft Office tools and this skill set is an area of strong emphasis in today's marketing curricula. The importance of other analytical software and Internet marketing tool skills is highly valued by nearly 20% of all employers. But, these skills are not given the same degree of emphasis by marketing curricula as is given Microsoft Office and statistical tool skill sets. While social media/networking tool skill requirements were not explicitly identified in the Monster.com job postings, it is possible that they were considered or listed as a subset of Internet marketing tools. Nearly one-third of all marketing curricula give this tool set either strong or moderate emphasis.

Key Differences in Emphases

Today's marketing curricula seems to place a preponderance of its emphasis on marketing

knowledge and not skills. Four of marketing curricula's top ten characteristics are all knowledge-related while the other six are skill related. One of marketing curricula's top ten emphasis areas (buyer behavior) does not even appear on the employer's list of desired characteristics. One emphasized knowledge area (strategy, segmentation, and positioning) shows up as number 5 on the list of employers seeking advanced-level marketing employees and advertising/promotion shows up in the top ten for employers seeking entry or advanced-level employees.

In general, those seeking entry-level employees place most of their emphasis on skill sets not marketing knowledge. This is in contrast to those seeking advanced-level employees who place relatively more emphasis on marketing knowledge. This finding echoes the marketing education literature of some 12 years ago (Lundstrom & White, 1997) and more recently by Davis, Misra, and Van Auken (2002) who note that many skill sets are transferrable across different disciplines and industries thus enabling students with such competencies to qualify for and secure more job opportunities than students without such skill sets.

The top ten characteristics mentioned in entry and advanced-level job postings were found not to be in the top ten list of characteristics emphasized by today's marketing curricula. This represents a total of seven characteristics (three knowledge areas and four skill sets) three of which were common to either the entry or advanced-level position. Relatively higher levels of emphasis are found for product or brand management, statistics and quantitative analysis, and personal selling. Moderate levels of emphasis are found for Internet marketing and other analytical skills while low levels of emphasis are found for time management and database analysis and mining.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Marketing educators must remember that preparing marketing students for entry-level marketing positions involves more emphasis on several skill sets than emphasis on general and specific marketing knowledge. The negative consequences of stressing marketing knowledge at the expense of skill development were pointed out over 20 years ago by Boatwright and Stamps (1988). Undoubtedly, there is a need to create student competencies in both areas but marketing educators should keep future employability of their students in mind when making trade-offs. To help accurately focus future curriculum change efforts, marketing educators are

advised to adopt the professional school approach described by Schibrowsky, Peltier, and Boyt (2002). And, marketing educators should remember that required marketing courses should not and cannot be reasonably expected to develop and hone many of the skill sets desired in today's marketplace. Solutions to skill development may be best left to the design and execution of the business school's entire required curricula. However, marketing educators can enhance such skill sets by incorporating them into other efforts to build marketing knowledge. It is suspected that much of this activity already occurs in applied learning settings such as student teams who are often expected to develop, write, and present marketing plans. Other learning activities such as case analysis, simulations, and role playing can also develop such skills while creating/reinforcing marketing knowledge simultaneously. Still, it appears that more emphasis should be placed on two technical skill areas: database marketing/mining and statistics/quantitative methods. The prior was recommended by Teer, Teer, and Kruck (2007) and the later recognized as a desired skill set for all business majors in 2005 by Harraway and Barker.

Marketing's increased use of Internet and other computer-based technologies are generating increasing large sets of detailed marketing information that students must know how to work with. Unfortunately, students have reported that these skills are lower priorities for them (Duke, 2002, p. 215). While employers in the early 1990s viewed computer skills as something that they could teach new hires (Tomkovich, Erffmeyer, & Hietpas, 1993), this belief is not held today as evidenced by how high employers ranked the importance of employee competencies relative to Microsoft Office tools and other analytical tools/software as shown in the Schlee (2009) study. As suggested by Walker et al (2009) today's employers may lack the resources (time and people) to provide what may be considered basic technical training and therefore expect colleges and universities to deliver this type of education and training. These authors recommend that marketing educators find real-world business or industry opportunities to let their students learn marketing theories through applications while at the same time engaging and honing their meta and technical skills.

Overall, the "best" solution to insuring that today's undergraduate marketing curricula will help students land jobs is most likely found within the fairly recent but popular trend toward outcomes assessment. Properly constructed and designed, such assessment has the potential to get and keep one's curriculum aligned with the stakeholders it intends to

serve. From this author's perspective, the two key or most important stakeholders are students and the organizations who hire them.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

First, the 2009 Monster.com study by Schlee (2009) was based on a content analysis of job postings in three U.S. cities (Chicago, Los Angeles, and Seattle) and the postings may therefore not be representative of the entire U.S. (marketing) job market. Second, the fact that specific desired (employee) characteristics were listed in a given job posting does not tell us if that characteristics is relatively more or less important than other characteristics also mentioned in the job posting. Third, it is entirely possible that the relatively low importance of marketing knowledge reported in the Schlee study reflects employer beliefs that such knowledge was assumed to exist if job candidates held an undergraduate marketing degree. Fourth, the empirical study used to generate information on what knowledge and skill areas are emphasized by marketing curricula relied on one particular marketing faculty member's perception. And just because a particular program emphasizes certain curricular aspects this does not necessarily equate with what students actually know or are able to do once they graduate from that program. Fifth, this study is susceptible to non-response bias. Sixth, the study's findings are likely to be more representative of AACSB accredited business schools versus those without such accreditation.

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