

ATTITUDES AMONG ADVERTISING STUDENTS AS THEY DEAL WITH THE CONSEQUENCES OF ECONOMIC RECESSION

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses attitudes among students enrolled in upper division advertising courses at three western U.S. universities relative to their perceptions of the economy, the advertising industry, employment prospects, and their sense of well-being. This study indicates that these students are cautiously optimistic about their own employment prospects after graduation and believe that their advertising education has adequately prepared them for an entry-level position. Students cite "hands-on" projects and portfolio building activities as particularly beneficial.

INTRODUCTION

As advertising students prepare to graduate and find employment, they are faced with the weakest job market in over twenty years (Wilson 1990). A study conducted at Northwestern University suggests that 42% of employers surveyed said they were "hiring fewer employees with bachelor's degrees" (Wilson 1990). In addition to the economic impact of recession, consumer attitudes have also been negatively affected as evidenced by an extremely weak level of Consumer Confidence which has declined by 50% since 1985 (Adler 1992). The result of this combination of factors is a relatively insecure graduating senior class. This creates a difficult period for Advertising graduates as their industry has been hard hit and the because advertising industry more so than most, reflects the mood of the society. This paper discusses the national recession, the advertising industry in recession, and the attitudes of advertising students relative to the economy their college experience, employment prospects, and their sense of well-being.

THE NATIONAL RECESSION

The nation continues to struggle with the longest recession since World War II. Despite election year rhetoric and isolated figures to the contrary, the nation has been in recession since 1990. Typically, recessions last 18-24 months and are followed by periods of measurable, and obvious, economic growth. This recession has been atypical and despite tried and true measures, like lowering of interest rates, the economy does not appear to be responding as it has in the past. During the first quarter of 1992 particularly, the weekly news magazines were devoting tremendous

editorial content to the economy. "In the last days of 1991 bad news seemed to be coming in large chunks as major employers were announcing layoffs. IBM plans to cut 20,000 jobs; GM 70,000 and Zale's announced plans to close 400 stores." Consumer confidence in 1991 was less than 1/2 of the 1985 level (Adler 1992).

The Advertising industry is being hit particularly hard, along with restaurants, bankers (loss of 100,000 jobs in 1991) according to Northwestern professor Paul Hirsch (Adler 1992).

Some journalists paralleled the current recession to that of the Great Depression with its negative associations of bread lines, empty factories and hopelessness. And, unlike typical post-war recessions, this one has hit both white and blue collar workers. "Some economists have described the current slump as a near depression when comparing growth rates during the 1930's of .5% versus the 1990's 2% annually. The gloom is deeper because this time unemployment has hit an influential and vocal class of managers and white collar workers" (Greenwald 1992).

An article appearing in the March 2, 1992 issue of *Newsweek* discussed the change in psychology of the public which, in addition to the sluggish economic numbers, suggest that a real attitudinal consumer shift may be in progress. What's also been lost is the psychology of plenty. Much of the Baby Boomers and Younger Americans are worse off than the generation that lived through World War II. Our needs seem to have outrun our income. The baby boomers expected astronomical living standards were unpleasantly surprised (Samuelson 1992).

The weekly news magazines were not the only medium to focus in of the economy. During the week of January 10, 1992 ABC ran stories on the depressed state of the economy and employment. Probably most disturbing, especially to those who plan to enter the job market, a clip showed a thousand people who waited in line for hotel jobs at a new Sheraton in Chicago. That newscast was followed with by a "Nightline" episode which discussed how to keep your current job, and what to do when looking for work. Even though college students are somewhat personally insulated from recession while in school, they hear of layoffs, firings and the impact of recession through the media and their immediate family.

IMPACT ON THE ADVERTISING INDUSTRY AND EDUCATION

Because the advertising industry is a mirror of economic activity, the impact of recession has been significant. Ad spending was virtually flat in US and abroad during 1991, but the number of people employed by ad agencies continued to decline. The Bureau of Labor Statistics showed that as of October 1991, 161,500 were on agency payrolls, a decline of 8,000 jobs of 4.7% versus year-ago levels. Employment in the top 10 agencies fared a little better, declining 1.4% (Lawrence 1991). Smaller agencies either merged or closed as their billing base failed to keep pace with expenses. Newspapers had their worst year in nearly 40 years, as ad revenues declined approximately, .5% (Lawrence 1991).

This decline in advertising employment affected advertising enrollment in colleges and universities. Data compiled for the 1992 issue of "Where Shall I Go to Study Advertising?" showed that 7,270 degrees were awarded in 1991, a decline of 1% versus 1990. The number of students enrolled in advertising education declined 2.8% to 21,581. The peak year was 1988-9 when enrollment was 22,680. A total of 111 schools offer advertising programs (Ross 1992).

Importantly the long term prospects are still excellent. The November 1991 Monthly Labor Review cited professions which will be the fastest growing between 1990-2005. The top 10 in terms of absolute increase were: registered nurses 767,000; nursing aides 552,000; receptionists/clerks 422,000; systems/computer analysts 366,000; child care workers 353,000; computer programmers 317,000; home health aides 263,000; restaurant cooks 257,000; and marketing/advertising/public relations managers 203,000 [C Q Researcher 1992].

These were categorized into three different groupings: Group I requires a minimum of a bachelor's degree; Group II requires post-secondary training, and Group III requires a high school education or less (C Q Researcher 1992). Of the 10 largest growing professions, only three are in the Group I category: systems analysts, computer programmers and marketing/advertising/public relations managers. Despite the current tight job market, the marketing/advertising/public relations career field will be among the largest growing professions during the next 15 years.

IMPACT ON STUDENTS

The anxiety resulting from the inability to find employment after graduation can lead to student burn-out. Neumann, Finally-Neumann and Reichel (1990) described burnout and the psychological impact. Burnout is identified as a state of

depleted energy which is assumed to be in response to excessive psychological and emotional demands made on an individual and feeling of low personal accomplishment.

Burnout can be minimized through a variety of means which offer change in routine for the student. Recommendations are that faculty and administrators ought to explore means of strengthening academic programs' flexibility through emphasizing electives, self-directed learning, independent study, and courses concerned with critical questions while replacing as much as possible large lecture-format courses. Activities like seminars, forums and special events help reduce student burnout. (Neumann, et al 1990).

SURVEY OF ADVERTISING STUDENTS

Purpose

The purpose of the study was to determine student's attitudes regarding the economy, advertising industry, their major classes, employment prospects and their overall feeling of well-being or satisfaction

Methodology

During the Spring semester 1991, a questionnaire was administered to advertising students enrolled in three mid-sized public universities in three western states (Arizona, New Mexico and Oregon). All of the institutions selected offer a major in Advertising and the questionnaire was administered in upper-division advertising classes. A total of 90 questionnaires were distributed and 68 questionnaires were returned (75.5%). A total of 63% of the respondents were advertising majors, 12% were marketing, with the remainder either classified as other or public relations. Almost half (48%) had experience in campus media, primarily with radio and television stations. Juniors and seniors accounted for 88% of respondents.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

Student Attitudes About the Economy and Job Prospects

Advertising students appear to understand the weakness in the economy and advertising industry itself. 85% believe the economy to have worsened since they declared themselves ad majors, and 75% believe that national advertising employment declined 1% to more than 3% in 1991. Over three quarters (78%) cite the job market to be fair to poor for ad graduates.

They see the overall job market realistically and believe it to be at best highly competitive, and at worst, very discouraging

TABLE 1
Overall Job Market (All Majors)

OK but highly competitive	15%
highly competitive requiring networking	36
discouraging	22
very discouraging	27
	100
	N=68

Advertising students appear to have realistic expectations of the length of time it will take to find a job, and the means to obtain it. 52% say they will look for a job anywhere they can obtain an interview. The students believe that it will take anywhere from 1-5+ months to find their first job.

TABLE 2
Length of Time Before Starting Ad Job

1-2 months	35%
3 months	25
4 months	18
5 or more	22
	100
	N=68

Most advertising students would like to work in either the creative or media departments. Surprisingly, all other advertising areas were cited about equally.

TABLE 3
Location of Ideal Entry Level Job

Creative	38%
Media	18
Account Service	13
Research	12
In-House Agency	10
Media Sales	9
	100
	N=68

During their first year of employment, advertising students expected to earn between \$15,000 and \$25,000 annually. This expectation is about equal to the starting salaries paid by many in the advertising profession.

TABLE 4
Anticipated First Year Salary

Under \$12,000	1%
\$12,000-\$15,000	16
\$15,001-\$19,999	31
\$20,000-\$25,000	40
\$25,001 +	12
	100
	N=68

Student Attitudes About College

A total of 7 questions were asked to determine how advertising students felt about their experiences in college and their major. Responses were tabulated on a 5 point Likert scale (1= agree completely; 5= disagree completely).

TABLE 5
How Students Feel About College

Question	Mean	Std. Dev.
I look forward to my major classes	1.8	.981
My major profs are in touch with the real world	2.2	1.050
I care about school as much as always	2.5	1.332
It is not difficult to get motivated for major classes	2.7	1.250
Advertising was the right choice of a major for me	2.8	1.483
I have as much energy for school as always	3.0	1.377
I am not burned out with school	3.4	1.306

Encouragingly, they look forward to their major classes and feel that their major professors are in touch with the real world. They appear neutral on the selection of advertising as the right choice for them and feel that they are, at least to a degree, burned out with school.

When asked how their advertising programs could be made better, students commented that practice, not theory, should be emphasized further.

TABLE 6
How To Make Program Stronger

Provide more "hands-on" activity	44%
More portfolio building projects	27
Require an internship	21
More theory in classes	6
Other	2
	100
	N=68

Student Attitudes About Employment

Seven questions were asked about attitudes regarding the job market in general and the degree of difficulty they anticipate in finding employment. Responses were given on a 5 point Likert scale (1=agree completely, 5= disagree completely).

TABLE 7
Student Attitudes About Employment Prospects

Question	Mean	Std. Dev.
I think networking is the best way to get first job	2.1	.964
My peers will not have an easier time finding a job	2.2	1.154
I am not a little scared about graduating right now	2.7	1.431
I feel optimistic about my immediate career prospects	2.8	1.186
I feel well prepared for entering the job market	3.0	1.197
Despite the tight job market, I will still get the kind of job I thought I would last year	3.5	1.215

Students are generally apprehensive about entering the job market and realize that networking is an important strategy to utilize. While they are neutral about their own prospects, they see others as having a less difficult time in finding their first job. Additionally, they believe that the worsening economy has reduced their prospects of finding as good an entry level position as they believed to be the case last year.

Student Attitudes About Themselves

Students were asked 9 questions regarding how they were feeling that day. These questions are similar to those given in psychological testing which are used to determine if subjects are depressed. Questions covered a wide range of topics including whether they were sad, felt good about themselves, had energy, were critical of themselves, and stayed on task. A 5 point Likert scale (1+ agree completely, 5= disagree completely) was utilized.

TABLE 8
Student Attitudes About Themselves

Question	Mean	Std. Dev.
I make good decisions	1.8	.857
My appetite is good	1.8	1.074
I am encouraged about my prospects for the future	2.1	.919
I get a lot of satisfaction out of things right now	2.1	.989
I have a lot of energy right now	2.4	1.214
I do not feel disappointed in myself	2.7	1.588
I do not feel sad all of the time	2.8	1.613
I am not critical of my weaknesses	2.9	1.592
It is not difficult to stay on task	3.5	1.299

These students do not appear to be feeling depressed, although they tend to see themselves as somewhat self critical and having slight difficulty in staying motivated. They tend to believe in themselves and their ability to make good decisions and have a reasonable amount of energy. Advertising students may be concerned about their immediate prospects, but appear to be optimistic overall.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In addition to providing both theory and practical application, students need to be reminded of the dynamic nature of the industry. Once a recovery is underway, the backlog of unfilled advertising positions will create an enormous demand for qualified applicants. Those entering the job market in the next six months will have to lower their expectations and accept positions which may merely get them a foothold in the industry. In time, their performance coupled with an expanding employment base will create new opportunities for positions better suited to their expectations.

Tom Johnson, director for career advising and placement for liberal arts majors at University of Wisconsin-Madison believes that students can improve their (immediate) job prospects by taking honing in on skills such as computer literacy, writing, and speaking effectively. Employers today want problem-solving skills which can be improved by understanding basic math and statistics (Wilson 1990).

For those who are still a year from graduation, internships offer an excellent vehicle to get practical experience and begin networking. L. Patrick Sheetz of Michigan State advises students to "gain experience through internships and summer jobs" before trying to enter the workplace. More than 100 employers surveyed said they looked for such experience when hiring recent graduates (Wilson 1990).

Educators can assist graduating students by preparing them for the reality of a difficult job market. In addition to good academic performance, students need to be active in internships and have the personal tenacity to deal with rejection and keep interviewing until they find something in the advertising industry or related field. After years of industry "right-sizing" the advertising profession is in an excellent position to aggressively restaff once an economic recovery is underway.

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