

THE CHALLENGE OF TEACHING CONSUMER BEHAVIOR, A CHALLENGE TO SCHOLARLY RESEARCH PRACTICES

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ABSTRACT

This paper summarizes a review of selected sources of material available on the pedagogy of consumer behavior. Comparatively little published work is available to aid instructors. Contrasting explanations are proposed: (a) absence of material indicates absence of need and (b) pedagogical publications reflect a production orientation.

INTRODUCTION

As professional marketing educators, most of us are comfortable with our abilities and performance in teaching marketing courses. Consequently, we may do less self-examination of our teaching methods than is appropriate. Typically, we find it easier to be objective about the performance limitations of others, for example in grading students' work, than we are about our own deficiencies. This paper is the result of a conscious effort on the authors' part to confront an admitted weakness in our instruction of consumer behavior and our attempt to deal with it. The result is not a paper in the mode of "let us share with you our solution to a problem." It is instead in the mode of "let us share our problem with you. Perhaps you can help us solve it."

In the simplest form, the problem is dissatisfaction with course structure and pedagogy in the consumer behavior class. This dissatisfaction is not a function of inexperience. The authors have combined experience of teaching consumer behavior more than 20 times in class sizes ranging from 7 to 65 students at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. The presence of frustration in the face of this experience led to a tentative hypothesis which is receiving its first informal test in the reaction to this paper. The hypothesis is: we are not alone; others share our frustrations with teaching consumer behavior. Parenthetically, this frustration is limited to consumer behavior instruction. The subject and content of consumer behavior are viewed as both vital and interesting, a condition which undoubtedly adds to the frustration.

If successful instruction is difficult, as we propose, several factors may contribute. Among them are the theoretical nature of the discipline, the interdisciplinary character of the discipline, and the absence of consensus about a comprehensive organizational framework.

THEORETICAL NATURE

As almost any instructor of consumer behavior can testify, a frequent complaint among students is the theoretical nature of consumer behavior. Even

among undergraduates, prior exposure to the theories of the social sciences is common. A reappearance of these theories in a consumer behavior class adds little unless it is accompanied by "real world examples" of application. The examples are sometimes hard to produce. The theory underlying the study of motives is, for instance, intuitively appealing. However, the actual process of determining motives and then translating them into a feasible marketing strategy is another story. Like the broader field of marketing itself, there appears to be a disparity between basic academic research and the applied research of practitioners. Students are frequently left wondering if anyone in the "real world" really uses the theories discussed in class. Having a professor well versed in the academic literature does not guarantee the student a supply of good field examples.

A related source of frustration for students is the lack of definite answers to typical consumer behavior questions. This is characteristic of many marketing courses, but it seems to be more pronounced in consumer behavior. Even the most rigorous research usually offers potential solutions at best, and contradictory results from different studies are not unusual. The youthfulness of the behavioral sciences provide a source of excitement and discovery to researchers and instructors. But the applied orientation of students, which faculty nurture in other courses in the curriculum, makes them a rightfully skeptical audience.

INTERDISCIPLINARY CHARACTER

The focus on purchase and consumption processes which defines the consumer behavior course makes an interdisciplinary approach necessary. It is this requirement which makes such extreme demands on the instructor's subject matter knowledge. It is difficult to acquire, much less maintain, an adequate understanding of each of the diverse academic fields which contribute to and in fact constitute the field of consumer behavior. We live in an age of specialization, and marketing professors are no exception. We have been encouraged to specialize our areas of expertise in both instruction and research in order to be more productive. But a good consumer behavior instructor should be equally comfortable lecturing about and leading class discussions on, for example, (a) sociological topics such as social class or family dynamics, (b) psychological theory used in the study of personality or motivation, (c) anthropological studies of culture and subculture, or (d) semiotic analysis of hedonic purchases. Few instructors possess the expertise to move confidently through the wide variety of material in the consumer behavior literature with uniform

proficiency.

MISSING FRAMEWORK

Adding to the challenge of instruction in consumer behavior is the lack of consensus about an overarching theory or organizational framework for the unfolding of the course's content. Development and presentation of material in the principles courses, by contrast, is facilitated by a common framework incorporating the marketing mix, external environmental relationships, internal business function relationships, and tools of analysis. Not only is this simple framework convenient for the organization of textbooks, but it becomes a logical outline for classroom instruction and insures a logical progression for both student and instructor.

The framework closest to a standard in consumer behavior is the Engel-Blackwell model which was, in fact, originally designed to be a pedagogical tool. It appears that as the field has grown and textbooks have proliferated we are moving farther away from rather than closer to a standard. The popular Engel-Blackwell model is now just one among many alternative approaches in textbook form. And instructors face a full range of course planning choices because there is no commonly agreed upon core for the consumer behavior course.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The authors have reported (a) personal dissatisfaction with the consumer behavior course and (b) a

belief that the source of much of the dissatisfaction lies in nonpersonal factors independent of and external to the instructor. If (b) has any basis in fact, it follows that other instructors have encountered similar frustrations. Successful responses to instructional problems should be accessible in the literature, particularly in the Journal of Marketing Education.

The articles published in JME were reviewed to establish the relative emphasis that authors and editors place on the problems of teaching consumer behavior and other marketing courses. The results of an informal content analysis of the titles of JME articles from 1979 to 1987 are displayed in Table 1. Articles were classified into topic areas based on the subject matter included in the title. In cases where an article title contained two topics, such as service and nonprofit, the article was counted in both topic categories.

In fact, articles pertaining to principles and marketing research courses dominate the journal contents. Few titles (six to be exact) emerge as relevant to consumer behavior pedagogy. A detailed review of the six articles relevant to teaching consumer behavior reveal a surface skimming of the topic at best. One was a film review (Yudelson 1984). A second focused on content issues rather than pedagogy (McNeal and McDaniel 1981). A third reported survey results on marketing teachers' attitudes toward the importance of consumer behavior courses (Taylor, Walters, and Perry 1981). Pedagogical issues were not addressed in this article, but one finding was noteworthy for our purposes. Consumer behavior was judged to be less important than principles of marketing and market-

TABLE 1

COURSE RELATED ARTICLES IN JOURNAL OF MARKETING EDUCATION

| COURSE/TEACHING ISSUE | 1979 | | 1980 | | 1981 | | 1982 | | 1983 | | 1984 | | 1985 | | 1986 | | 1987 | | Total | |
|-----------------------|------|-----|------|------|------|------|------|-----|------|-----|------|------|------|-----|------|-----|------|------|-------|----|
| | Apr | Nov | Spr | Fall | Spr | Fall | Spr | Sum | Fall | Spr | Sum | Fall | Spr | Sum | Fall | Spr | Sum | Fall | | |
| Principles | 4 | | 3 | 1 | | 1 | 1 | | | 1 | 1 | 1 | | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 20 |
| Marketing Research | | | 1 | 4 | 2 | | | 1 | | | | 1 | | | 2 | | | 3 | | 14 |
| International | | 2 | 1 | | | | 1 | 1 | | | 1 | 1 | | | | | | | 1 | 8 |
| Marketing Management | 1 | | | 1 | | | | 1 | | | 1 | | | | 1 | | | 1 | 1 | 7 |
| Advertising | | | | | | | | 2 | | 1 | | 1 | | 1 | 1 | | 1 | | | 7 |
| Consumer Behavior | | 1 | 2 | | | | | 1 | | 1 | | | | 1 | | | | | | 6 |
| Sales | 2 | | | | 1 | | | | | | 1 | | | | | | | | 1 | 5 |
| Industrial | | | | | 1 | | | 1 | | | 1 | | | | 2 | | | | | 5 |
| Retailing | | | | | | 1 | | | 1 | | | 1 | 1 | | | | 1 | | | 5 |
| Nonprofit | | | 1 | 2 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | 3 |
| Distribution | | 1 | | | | | | 1 | | | | | | | | 1 | | | | 3 |
| Pricing | | | | | | | 1 | 1 | | 1 | | | | | | | | | | 3 |
| Procurement | | | | | | | | | | | | | | 2 | | | | | | 2 |
| Services | | | 1 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | 1 |
| Direct | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | 1 | | | | | 1 |
| Public Policy | | | 1 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | 1 |
| Public Relations | | | | | | | | | | | 1 | | | | | | | | | 1 |

ing research, equally important to marketing policy and promotion/advertising, and more important than all other marketing courses. A fourth article was a comparative review of consumer behavior texts (Finn 1985). Pedagogical problems were not directly addressed since the emphasis was placed on the content of subject matter and the quality of the treatment. Only two articles proposed specific methods to improve instruction (Schewe 1980 and McCuen 1983). It is significant that Schewe emphasized the same points about the difficulty of instruction, and McCuen noted the paucity of literature on content teaching methods.

A review of articles in the American Marketing Association proceedings reveal an equal lack of material. McCuen was able to identify only one paper on teaching consumer behavior in the proceedings of the American Marketing Association annual conference for education between 1971 and 1981. A check of the five years from 1982 to 1986 reveals no additional papers.

The Association for Consumer Research focuses almost entirely on consumer behavior content questions to the exclusion of instructional issues. The Association's proceedings, Advances in Consumer Research, last show a track on instruction in 1977. Since then, the subject is virtually invisible.

The last source reviewed, proceedings of the annual Western Marketing Educators Association conference, shows slightly more activity but much of it is preliminary in nature. In addition its accessibility is much more limited in library holdings.

In summary, reviewing the literature on consumer behavior instruction leads one to the conclusion that the body of knowledge in consumer behavior is continuing to grow at a rapid pace. But there is a dearth of material dealing with instructional issues.

TENTATIVE EXPLANATIONS

Where does this leave us? As we stated earlier, the purpose in writing this paper was not to offer a solution but to pose the question, "Are we alone in our discomfort with our current pedagogy in consumer behavior?" The few published papers on the topic suggest that at least we have some company in our discontent.

Obvious

The question remains, why are there so few publications or conference presentations devoted to the topic of consumer behavior instruction. Of course the most obvious answer is that, in fact, we may be wrong and that the majority of consumer behavior instructors feel quite satisfied and comfortable with their current teaching methodology. This suggests that the problem of consumer behavior instruction lies with the authors alone. However, in self defense, the few articles discussing the teaching of consumer behavior enumerate many of the same problems we are encountering. The unknown is the number of instructors experiencing the same frustrations.

Provocative

But the more challenging explanation for the lack of material on consumer behavior instruction is the possibility that scholarship in marketing pedagogy has become production oriented. This is to say, the need for more information on consumer behavior instruction exists. However, as scholars, we prefer to write (produce) publications on topics about which we feel much more comfortable such as marketing research and marketing principles. Our experience indicates that the typical principles of marketing course or marketing research course poses far fewer challenges and difficulties than a consumer behavior course. Nowhere in the traditional system of research, writing, submission, and editing (borrowed from older disciples) do we see an assessment of need to any degree other than an intuitive basis. The result is equivalent to a strategy of emphasizing strengths and ignoring weaknesses. This approach may be appropriate for businesses in certain situations but it seems inappropriate for the needs of marketing students.

IMPLICATIONS

The irony of marketing educators being seduced by a production orientation is apparent. The cure, of course, lies in the practice of marketing principles, that is, focusing on market needs and employing appropriate analytic tools to clarify and respond to them. A study of the needs of marketing instructors would be a good starting point.

CONCLUSIONS

Our search through the literature on marketing pedagogy produced a disappointingly small body of work to aid in dealing with instructional problems in consumer behavior. One interpretation is that frustration with teaching consumer behavior is rare and that the limited number of works indicate a limited need. Alternatively, it may be argued that publications indicate solutions rather than needs and that a limited number of solutions have been devised. It is proposed, ironically, that a production-oriented research and publications system is a contributing factor to this lack of attention in the literature.

While we did not answer any questions in this paper, we hope we raised a few important questions, and by doing so, have prompted our colleagues to explore the teaching of consumer behavior with us. As educators, we need to exemplify the use of our marketing tools. If we do we will help everyone in the profession with marketing instruction.

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