

THE SKILLS VERSUS THEORY-BASED KNOWLEDGE PARADOX IN MARKETING EDUCATION: A GAP ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

The relevancy of marketing curriculum to work performance is a topic of importance to marketing educators. This paper describes the results of a survey of marketing alumni to gather curriculum and work-related information. A gap analysis approach was employed to measure the perception of the degree of importance of skills and theory-based knowledge to one's current employment and the effectiveness of the delivery of skills and knowledge through the marketing curriculum. Results show that marketing graduates perceive that they are underprepared in certain skills and are overprepared in certain knowledge areas. Implications are discussed. The paper presents a model for depicting the relationship of skills and theory-based knowledge to one's career in the area of marketing, and offers suggestions for areas of future research.

The continuous improvement process for a marketing major calls for an examination of marketing curricula in several respects— coverage of theory, application, currency of information, and relevancy to the careers of marketing graduates. The relevancy aspect of curriculum improvement can be assessed in part by asking marketing graduates about the extent to which their marketing education prepared them for their marketing careers. This paper examines the relevancy of marketing curriculum through a gap analysis applied to marketing alumni. Such an analysis measures the difference between the perceived importance of a set of work-related skills and knowledge and the degree to which a basic marketing curriculum prepared them in these areas.

Educational institutions evaluate student satisfaction for a number of reasons, including student retention (Hatcher et al. 1992); student satisfaction (Gwinner and Beltramini 1995; Juillerat and Schreiner 1996); outcomes or value added (Hartman and Schmidt 1995); and program planning and evaluation (Borden 1995). There are a number of ways of measuring program outcomes – student evaluation of faculty, exit examinations, job placements, and student and alumni perceptions. However, according to Halpern (1988), there is no best single indicator of program quality. Still, the degree to which alumni believe that

their marketing education prepared them for marketing careers is certainly a significant indicator of curriculum quality. Basically, a measurement of alumni perceptions should reveal much about the skills and knowledge components of the marketing option. As Headley and Choi (1992, p.8) point out, "to improve service quality, one must listen to the customer since quality is ultimately defined by customer perceptions." In the case of the academy, this would include graduates, students, recruiters and employers.

Assessment studies have looked at various aspects of the perceptions of marketing programs. Nordstrom and Sherwood (1997) compared undergraduate and graduate perceptions of the adequacy of skills and characteristics required by the work environment. Several other studies have used a gap-analysis approach to assessment. Gap analysis, described by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985), is portrayed as a divergence between either an expected services and a perceived (delivered) service from a customer's point of view, or the difference between a service provider's specified level of service and the service actually delivered. Measurement can be made objectively in terms of "...what the consumer receives as a result of his interactions with a service firm" (Lewis and Klein 1986, p. 33). Winer (1998) described a gap analysis approach to assessing the administration of a business school, including the design of curricula to meet employers' expectations. Giacobbe and Segal (1994) also used a gap model to explore the performance interrelationships that existed between marketing students, marketing research educators, and marketing research practitioners. Their study examined perceptions of performance skills and abilities desired by practitioners relative to the extent of their delivery. Lundstrom and White (1997) also used a gap analysis to measure perceptual differences between practitioners and academicians on curriculum content and research areas in international marketing.

KNOWLEDGE VERSUS SKILLS

The relationship between skills and knowledge presents a dilemma to marketing educators.

1990; Scott and Frontczak 1996). The average respondent age was 27.2 years, and males made up 69.7% of the sample. The approximate undergraduate G.P.A. was 2.80 and the marketing major G.P.A. was 2.94.

Variables

The primary variables of interest, developed from the authors' prior research, ranged from the acquisition of written communication skill to the much more general ability to understand how marketing relates to other functional areas in business. These primary variables are listed in Table 1. The seven point semantic differential scale (7=high, 1=low) measured the perceived importance to one's current employment of each of the eleven knowledge and skill areas. Separately, the same items were also measured in the context of how well the university's marketing curriculum prepared them in each of the areas.

DATA ANALYSIS

The mean ratings of each of the eleven items, relating to the areas of knowledge and skills, were computed. Some interesting results emerged. For example, "Oral Communication Skills" were rated as the most important area with respect to one's current employment (Item 6), but were rated third in terms of how well respondents felt they had been educated in that area. Further, the "Ability to analyze the relationship between marketing variables (e.g., 4Ps)" (Item 3) was rated the lowest in terms of importance but came in fourth in terms of their preparedness. Given the anticipated differences, a gap analysis was conducted for each item. This approach examined the distance between the rated importance of a given knowledge or skill area to one's current employment and the perception of the alumni as to whether the marketing program had prepared them for that area.

RESULTS

As can be seen in Table 1, the gap analysis indicates that out of the eleven variables relating to knowledge and skills that many marketing curricula try to impart, eight showed a divergence between perceived importance to one's current employment and level of preparedness.

[Insert Table 1 here. A Gap Analysis Of Alumni's Perception Of Skills And Theory-Based Knowledge Importance Contrasted With Preparation Provided By The Marketing Program]

Of these eight items, the alumni felt that they were "underprepared" in three areas in the sense that they rated their importance as being significantly higher than their level of preparation ($p < .05$). These areas are:

- Technical preparation (ability to use software such as spreadsheets, statistical packages, database packages in a marketing context)
- Oral communication skills
- Written communication skills

Similarly, in the other five areas they were being "overprepared." That is to say, they rated their preparedness higher than the importance of these areas ($p < .05$). These items are:

- Ability to identify a marketing problem
- Ability to analyze the relationship between marketing variables (e.g., 4 P's)
- Ability to communicate effectively using the language of marketing
- Understanding marketing concepts
- Understanding how marketing relates to other functional areas in business

It is noteworthy that all three areas of "under-preparation" involve skills, while all five areas of "over-preparation" involve knowledge. The findings support our expectation that recent graduates would value skills more than knowledge areas. The classificatory data also showed that 15 (22.7%) of the respondents were working in fields, which were unrelated to marketing. It is reasonable to assume that these respondents would value their marketing knowledge at a level lower than those who had jobs that were marketing related would. Therefore, the data were re-analyzed to include only those whose jobs related to marketing. As can be noted in Table 2, the results were revealing.

[Insert Table 2 here. A Gap Analysis Of Alumni's Perception Of Skills And Theory-Based Knowledge Importance Contrasted With Preparation Provided By The Marketing Program]

The areas of perceived "under-preparation" were identical to those revealed in the first analysis (items 1, 5, 6). Yet, two items (items 2 and 9) of perceived "over-preparation" were not significant ($p > .05$):

- Ability to identify a marketing problem
- Ability to communicate effectively using the language of marketing

This sub-group concurred with the earlier finding regarding perceived over-preparation on items 3, 10 and 11 ($p < .05$). As evidenced by items 2 and 9, it appears that one tends to value knowledge areas

somewhat more when one's job is related to that field, as should be expected.

IMPLICATIONS

The relative importance of knowledge compared to skills, over time, has not been clearly established. This is because most of the past research, including our own study, has focused on marketing graduates who have been employed five or fewer years. It is therefore understandable that general skills are valued more highly, as we found, rather than marketing knowledge. Basically, skills are valued more highly by managers of entry-level jobs, and that is transmitted to the inductees. These skills (communication, interpersonal, quantitative, and so forth) are developed throughout a student's college career. The utility of these skills cuts across functional areas and is useful for most jobs. These skills are also very important from the perspective of students as well as employers. Yet, knowledge of marketing is likely to be more useful after graduates have been promoted beyond entry-level jobs. It is proposed herewith that the knowledge area will be more important than after the first five years or so from graduation (see Figure 1).

[Insert Figure 1 here. Impact Of Knowledge On Job Effectiveness]

As can be seen in the model, it is hypothesized that marketing knowledge will have a greater impact on job effectiveness than skills five years or more after graduation. In other words, both skills and knowledge are important for initial job performance. However, marketing knowledge has increasing utility as one advances in one's career. Therefore, it is proposed that future research should also focus on marketing graduates who have been working for over five years to assess what they find to be more important in terms of marketing curriculum.

With our sample, we found that the alumni felt underprepared in terms of technical preparation as well as written and oral communication skills. Interestingly, the need for good communication skills has been emphasized in the literature (Deckinger, Brink, Katzenstein, and Primavera 1990; Gaedeke and Tootelian 1989; Gaedeke, Tootelian, and Schaffer 1983; John and Needle 1989; Kelley and Gaedeke 1990; Scott and Frontczak 1996) as well as by recruiters. On the other hand, alumni felt they had been overprepared in terms of the ability to identify market problems, to analyze the relationship between marketing variables, and to communicate effectively using the language of marketing. Other areas of over-preparation related to an understanding of the

marketing process and how marketing relates to other functional areas of business.

In the second analysis of the data, which included only those alumni whose jobs related to marketing, with two exceptions, findings were identical to the first analysis. Most skills – written or oral communication, for example – are valuable in jobs in any area of business. Knowledge areas of marketing, in contrast, are likely to be of greater importance to people who are actually working in jobs related to marketing. As we found, graduates working in marketing did not feel they were overprepared in two of the knowledge areas (Items 2 and 9, contrary to what we found in the first analysis).

Future research should look at this phenomenon in other majors, too, for example accounting, finance, and management. We would hypothesize that skills are valued more highly by recent graduates in all majors than are knowledge areas.

The results must be viewed with some caution. Our findings point towards the ongoing knowledge versus skills debate (Ronchetto and Buckles 1994; Cunningham 1995; Rotfeld 1996; Sanoff and Daniel 1996; Thomas 1998; Fortune 1997). This includes a discussion of whether educators should aim to prepare students for their entry-level job or for their longer-term careers. Entry-level positions may emphasize skills more than knowledge, while management level positions would emphasize knowledge relatively more. Thus, alumni who have been employed for five or fewer years would be more likely to see preparation in skills areas more important than preparation in knowledge areas. Corporations spend substantial sums of money every year in training employees, and some believe they are trying to pass on some of their training cost to educational institutions. Yet, knowledge has a more long-term value to the individual. Which one is more important from the perspective of an institution of higher learning, especially ones that are subsidized by tax dollars? Hopefully, this research will provide a catalyst for a discussion on this topic.

CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS

Gap analysis has been used by marketers to identify preference gaps in the marketplace (Brown and Swartz 1989; Headley and Choi 1992; Davis and O'Neill 1999). This paper applies such an analysis to curriculum development and relevancy assessment. This has been done for both knowledge and skills relevant to the marketing curriculum. It essentially reveals areas of under preparedness and over preparedness. These kinds of "identified gaps" could

be starting point for a discussion among faculty regarding possible modifications of the curriculum and how class formats are configured. It would be interesting to determine whether marketing knowledge is evidencing a decline in importance as marketing educators respond to the market need to create additional skill enhancements.

Other areas in need of future research include a gap analysis of knowledge and skills based on the perceptions of the entry-level employee and their immediate supervisor. A second area of inquiry would include an identical gap analysis of the perceptions of the same supervisors contrasted with higher levels of management. These studies may contribute to a thoughtful discussion and potential resolution of a festering area in need of inquiry.

Of course, these areas where the gaps are found may require a reassessment as to curriculum emphasis, and effort may be needed to address the areas of under-preparation. A limitation of this study is that data were collected from alumni from one marketing program. We do recognize that the current findings may be idiosyncratic to our faculty mix, program, as well as students. Others may find gaps in quite different areas. We also caution curriculum developers to validate their findings with multiple (longitudinal) surveys before undertaking major curriculum change. It would be interesting to compare findings from institutions with similar characteristics to see if some systematic patterns emerge. We recognize that the mix of employers where our students are placed is one of the key drivers of the perception regarding over- and under-preparation. If the mix of employers is significantly different at another school, different results could be expected. Overall, the limitations of conducting this type of research cannot be overlooked. Hopefully, our paper will stimulate the addressing of these issues, as well as a discussion of the utility of skills relative to knowledge at various points of career development among marketing graduates.

COMMENTS

Tables and figures are available from the first author on request.

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