

JUSTIFICATION FOR AN UNDERGRADUATE SUSTAINABILITY COURSE IN THE MARKETING CURRICULUM

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the importance of building the concept of sustainability into marketing curriculum today. An undergraduate course, titled "Sustainability and Social Responsibility in Marketing," was developed and evaluated by students in the class at the end of the semester. Overall, the findings from the survey indicate this is an extremely beneficial course. Recommendations are offered for those considering adding such a course.

INTRODUCTION

Marketing departments of universities across the U.S. are continually updating and revising curriculum to meet: (1) the changing needs and trends in the business world and the marketing arena, in particular, (2) AACSB guidelines, such as the importance of focusing on social responsibility in business education, (3) the mission/vision of the university/college, business school and department, (4) current needs of employers, and (5) legislative mandates regarding assurance of learning and student achievement. A current, significant trend in nearly all businesses today is the topic of sustainability.

The building, cosmetics, furniture, clothing, and numerous other industries are just a few examples of those businesses focusing on sustainability.

Marketing educators can no longer simply mention the concept of "green marketing" in a principles course and then ignore the idea in future marketing courses. Bridges and Wilhelm (2008) thoroughly discuss the significance of integrating sustainability into the marketing curriculum. This paper proposes a course for any undergraduate marketing curriculum called "Sustainability and Social Responsibility in Marketing." Certainly many colleges are incorporating more on sustainability into various marketing courses such as Product Development, Consumer Behavior and Logistics courses, yet the topic deserves more coverage

and a separate course may be necessary for marketing students.

This paper will: (1) discuss the changing popularity of marketing courses, (2) justify the importance of sustainability in marketing strategy, (3) describe an undergraduate marketing course taught in a Western university titled "Sustainability and Social Responsibility in Marketing," including topics, sources, and experiential learning assignments for such a course, (4) analyze the results of student feedback on the effectiveness of the sustainability course, and (5) provide recommendations for any school or educator considering offering such a course on sustainability.

CHANGING POPULARITY OF MARKETING COURSES

Thams and Glueck (2007) found that the top five courses offered by AACSB schools are: Marketing Research, Consumer Behavior, Marketing Management, Advertising Management, and Marketing Strategy, which are typical of the set of "required" courses in an undergraduate curriculum. In the same study, the courses identified as important to businesses are Business to Business, Marketing Strategy, Advertising, Marketing Research, and Electronic Marketing.

The popularity of various marketing courses and historical trends in curriculum have changed greatly over the years. In the 1940s and 1950s, Retailing, Personal Selling, Marketing Theory, Advertising, and Distribution were typical course titles. In the 1960s, Consumer Behavior, Marketing Research, and International Marketing were included in the curriculum. The 1970s and 1980s saw new courses such as Services Marketing and Marketing for Non-Profits. Courses on Electronic or Internet Marketing as well as many specialty courses such as Sports Marketing and New Product Innovation were added as electives in the 1990s and early 2000s. Even with AACSB guidelines and the input of marketing department advisory boards, marketing curriculum often lags behind what employers find relevant.

Although the idea of social responsibility has been a major concern of businesses especially since the 1960s, there has been an even greater emphasis on

ethics and social responsibility in recent years. Marketing educators have been discussing the “societal marketing concept” for many years now (Kerin, Hartley, & Rudelius, 2007), yet the implications impact every aspect of business today. Sustainability is significant to each of the Four Ps of marketing (Bridges & Wilhelm, 2008; Fuller, 1999).

IMPORTANCE OF SUSTAINABILITY IN MARKETING STRATEGY

Several primary reasons for studying sustainable marketing discussed by Fuller (1999) include: (1) Sustainability is a long term trend that is here to stay in business, (2) ecological factors are key for the bottom-line today, and (3) failure to value sustainability will eventually kill the planet. Another way of understanding the importance of sustainability is the concept of the “triple bottom line” (Savitz & Weber, 2006) or the Three Es important for business today: (1) Environmental Sustainability (health of our ecosystem), (2) Economic Sustainability (long term financial stability), and (3) Equitable Distribution of Resources for all of society (Wilhelm et al., 2006; Bridges & Wilhelm, 2008). Marketing students will readjust their thinking about marketing when introduced to these concepts of sustainability. Although numerous definitions of “sustainable marketing” have been proposed, all revolve around protection of our environment and ecosystems, financial responsibility and broad concern for our society. “Green marketing” focuses on how each of the Four Ps can help protect the environment, while sustainability includes the dimension of financial or economic prosperity while implementing green strategies (Lozada, 2003).

UNDERGRADUATE COURSE, SUSTAINABILITY AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN MARKETING

An undergraduate course on sustainability provides students with an in depth look at redesigning marketing processes and strategies for sustainable and socially responsible products and services. The learning objectives for such a course in the marketing curriculum would include:

1. Employ a thorough understanding of the nature of social responsibility and sustainability in marketing.
2. Demonstrate critical and analytical thinking with regard to social responsibility and sustainability through analysis and discussion of relevant case studies.
3. Demonstrate a thorough understanding of various aspects of developing products, pricing, distribution and promotional programs that address sustainability issues.

4. Create socially responsible/sustainable marketing strategies with regard to:
 - a. minimizing costs and maximizing profit and sales;
 - b. addressing the global legislative/ regulatory environment;
 - c. the expanding Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability (LOHAS) Marketplace;
 - d. using these strategies for competitive advantage;
 - e. conducting cause-related marketing as part of an integrated marketing strategy; and
 - f. engaging in social responsibility and sustainability as a moral and ethical imperative.

General topics to be included in a syllabus would be as follows:

1. Introduction to Sustainability and Social Responsibility
2. The Green Market/The Green Imperative
3. Cause-Related Marketing
4. Sustainable Marketing Strategies
5. Developing Sustainable Products
6. Sustainable Channel Networks
7. Sustainable Marketing Communications
8. Sustainable Pricing Strategies for Optimal Profitability
9. Markets and Market Developments
10. Model for Sustainability and Corporate Social Responsibility

Several textbooks are available for educators to use in such a course, such as *Sustainable Marketing* by Donald A. Fuller (1999) and *The Next Sustainability Wave* by Bob Willard (2005). Bridges and Wilhelm (2008) provide a helpful list of many sustainability cases and articles which may also be useful in developing an undergraduate course.

An experiential learning assignment to help students understand that organizations can make a profit while making a difference is often a critical component of a sustainability course. For example, two possible assignments which may be given to students in a sustainability course are: (1) develop a strategic marketing plan for a new product or service with sustainability/corporate social responsibility as a core part of the marketing strategy, or (2) analyze an existing product or service and build sustainability into the positioning and marketing strategy. The second assignment was used in this course.

RESULTS OF STUDENT FEEDBACK ON SUSTAINABILITY COURSE

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of the “Sustainability and Social Responsibility in Marketing” course from the student perspective, a survey consisting of three parts was given to 24 students in one section at the end of the semester. Part one of the survey was based on an instrument developed by Sandler and Kamins (1987), where students responded to 17 statements on a nine-point rating scale (where 1 equals “strongly disagree” and 9 equals “strongly agree”). This part is intended to measure students’ overall evaluation of the course. The items relate to student learning in the course through their involvement, enjoyability and satisfaction. Overall, students’ perceptions of the sustainability course were extremely favorable. (See Table 1 for mean values for all 17 statements.) Twelve of 17 items received a mean of 8 or higher on the 9-point scale.

The second part of the survey measured student’s perceptions regarding critical thinking in the course. Fifteen items were included using a 7-point rating scale (where 1 equals “much worse than other classes” and 7 equals “much better than other classes”). Overall, students believe this course improved a variety of CT skills. (See Table 2 for the mean values of the 15 statements.) Nine of 15 items received a mean of 6 or higher on the 7-point scale.

Finally, part three of the survey included four more statements which allowed students to evaluate the course. Students responded to these statements once again on a 9-point agreement scale. (See Table 3 for the mean values of the four statements.) All four items received a mean of 8 or higher on the 9-point scale, indicating an extremely positive overall evaluation of the course.

In general, students thought the sustainability course was:

- Helpful in understanding and learning about sustainability;
- Enjoyable and not a waste of time;
- Promoted better teacher-student relationships;
- Was valuable for advanced marketing classes;
- Suggested that the instructor cared about students learning about sustainability;
- Was worth the effort.

In terms of critical thinking skills, students generally believed that the sustainability course:

- Improved their ability to pay attention;
- Improved listening skills;
- Facilitated learning concepts and methods;
- Developed an openness to new ideas;

- Cultivated responsibility for their own learning;
- Developed respect for others;
- Developed the capacity to think for oneself;
- Developed the capacity to make informed decisions.

In terms of the students overall evaluation of the course, they enjoyed this class more than most, believed the course met the course objectives, would recommend this instructor and believed the class encouraged critical thinking.

TABLE 1
Student Evaluation of Sustainability Course

(9-point scale where 1 = strongly disagree and 9 = strongly agree)

	<u>Mean</u>	<u>SD</u>
1. This course was helpful to me in understanding sustainability.	8.71	.91
2. The project made the course more interesting.	6.87	1.45
3. Working in this course allowed me to apply what I learned to real life situations.	7.96	1.16
4. I was satisfied with my work in this course.	7.83	1.71
5. I learned a lot about sustainability from this course.	8.79	.66
6. I was highly involved with this course.	7.58	1.79
7. This course was enjoyable.	8.71	.75
8. I was satisfied with the classroom lectures.	8.62	.77
9. This course promoted better teacher/student relationships.	8.25	1.15
10. I believe this course is valuable for advanced marketing classes.	8.42	.88
11. This course was not boring.	8.54	.66
12. I enjoyed working on the project.	7.37	1.38
13. I would recommend this course to other marketing students.	8.79	.66
14. This course did not seem silly.	8.50	.83
15. This course was not a waste of time.	8.83	.48
16. This course suggests the instructor cares about learning sustainability.	8.62	1.01
17. This course was worth the effort.	8.33	1.74

TABLE 2
Evaluation of Critical Thinking in the Sustainability Course

(7-point scale where 1= much worse than other classes and 7= much better than other classes)

	<u>Mean</u>	<u>SD</u>
1. Develops problem solving skills	5.79	1.10
2. Improves ability to pay attention	6.08	1.02
3. Develops ability to concentrate	5.83	1.01
4. Improves listening skills	6.17	.70
5. Improves speaking skills	5.00	1.53
6. Improves writing skills	5.42	1.14
7. Facilitates learning concepts	6.21	.83
8. Facilitates learning methods	6.33	.82
9. Develops an openness to new ideas	6.87	.67
10. Develops ability to work productively with others	5.12	1.80
11. Cultivates responsibility for one’s own learning	6.12	1.19
12. Improves self confidence in ability to learn	5.87	.90
13. Develops respect for others	6.00	1.02
14. Develops capacity to think for oneself	6.46	.93
15. Develops capacity to make informed decisions	6.29	1.22

TABLE 3
Evaluation of the Course

(9-point scale where 1= strongly disagree and 9 = strongly agree)

	<u>Mean</u>	<u>SD</u>
1. I enjoyed this class more than most	8.42	.97
2. I believe this class met the course objectives	8.50	.72
3. I would recommend this instructor to other students	8.96	.20
4. This class encouraged critical thinking	8.50	1.18

RECOMMENDATIONS

The undergraduate “Sustainability and Social Responsibility in Marketing” course evaluated in this paper received an extremely favorable evaluation by the students. They learned the importance of designing marketing strategies for sustainable and socially-responsible products and services. They understood that profitability can coexist with a successful sustainable model of business. Although student behavioral and lifestyle changes were not evaluated in this study, that would be a useful addition to future studies of the effectiveness of sustainability courses. Sustainability can help both for-profit and not-for-profit organizations achieve a competitive advantage. Marketing departments considering adding such a course to their undergraduate curriculum might consider the following recommendations:

1. Have someone teach the course who has achieved a high level of competence in the field of sustainability (in this case the instructor was the principal of a business totally focused on sustainability and green marketing for the past decade);
2. Consider including the course as an “omnibus” course before officially adding it to the regular curriculum;
3. Consider the course as a cross-disciplinary course with industrial or graphic design or other related courses;
4. Rely heavily on recent articles since the field is changing so rapidly and textbooks are limited;
5. Start the course with the basics of marketing and the Four Ps since some students may not have completed a Principles of Marketing course.

In conclusion, the sustainability course has grown in popularity as more students realize the importance of this issue in all aspects of business and marketing today. The marketing curriculum not only needs to reflect current business trends, but lead in the education of those trends. Sustainability has moved from a trend to an established, key aspect of business.

References Available on Request