

# MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS ETHICS: A CASE STUDY USING THE VIGNETTE TECHNIQUE

Maria van Dessel and Charles Patti, University of Denver

## Overview

The teaching of ethics has had a long and controversial history in higher education. Over the years, ethics has taken on increasing importance in university curricula. In advertising and marketing communication courses, ethics—and closely related topics—have long been an integral part of textbooks and course content. Every recognized advertising, advertising management, and marketing communications text has significant coverage of the topic (Belch and Belch 2007; Duncan 2002, 2005; Fill 2005; Percy and Elliott 2002; Semenik 2002; Shimp 2007; Wells et al. 2008).

Above all business practices, advertising is often singled out for unethical practice, ranging from misleading the consumer, offensive message appeals to increasing materialism through promotion of unnecessary products/services (Burnett et al. 2003). Few, would challenge the relevance of ethics in a business school curriculum (indeed AACSB accreditation standards specifically identify ethics as a core component of business degrees); however, three controversial issues have emerged. One is the ongoing question of whether or not ethics can be taught at all; a second is the structure of ethics courses (stand alone courses versus integration of the topic throughout the curriculum; and a third is how best to measure the effectiveness of ethics courses.

All three of these issues are significant and have been widely discussed and debated in the learning and teaching literature and in the ethics education literature. This paper focuses on one of these issues—*the measurement of learning in ethics courses*. Ethics education, undertaken as a dedicated subject (marketing communications regulation and ethics) at an Asia-Pacific university, is illustrated here as a case study, using the vignette technique to measure the effectiveness of teaching and learning ethics. The case described in this paper includes a study of learning outcomes from undergraduate students in a large, public university within one Asia-Pacific country as well as the views of key academic professionals in four other Asia-Pacific countries. The overall purpose of this case study is to help improve the learning outcomes of ethics courses—in the Asia-Pacific region and in other countries that share a similar social-cultural perspective on ethics.

References available upon request