

AN EXPERIMENT WITH "THEME DAYS" IN CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

Nancy T. Frontczak and Clay Daughtrey, Department of Marketing, Metropolitan State College of Denver, P.O. Box 173362, Campus Box 79, Denver, CO. 80217; (303) 556-4951, frontczn@mscd.edu

ABSTRACT

This study describes a new experiential method of assessment in a Consumer Behavior course, called "Theme Days." This technique provided an "element of surprise" so important to experiential marketing experiences and it offered great opportunity for critical thinking. Two methods were used to measure the effectiveness of Theme Days. Overall, this creative, new technique was favorably evaluated by both students and educators.

INTRODUCTION

The Experience Economy (Pine and Gilmore 1999) suggests that marketers should provide memorable, compelling experiences for their consumers. In the field of marketing education educators are also continually providing experiences for their students. The variety of new and creative experiential learning assignments in the marketing education literature is expanding each year. In a study of student perceptions of learning activities, Karns (2005) found that internships, student-operated businesses, live-case projects, case competitions and other active learning experiences evoked the most favorable student responses. Clever new assignments, such as the online auction project (Wood and Suter 2004), allow marketing students to apply theoretical concepts to a fun, experiential learning exercise.

One of the major points discussed by Pine and Gilmore (1999) is that marketing needs to provide an "element of surprise" to keep customers returning. For example, both Las Vegas and Disney World, perhaps the ultimate of experiences in the realm of the experience economy, consistently provide clever, new experiences full of surprise for their market. The "element of surprise" contributes to the success of each. In the academic world surprise can turn mundane events, such as a rote lecture, into a truly memorable experience. Marketing educators should consider this "element of surprise" concept in the educational experiences they offer.

This paper presents a unique approach for a Consumer Behavior course organized around a new concept, called "Theme Days," which continually offered the element of surprise to the students. For this research the initial surprise took place the first

day of class when the instructor proposed the "Theme Days" concept to the students. There was an initial overwhelmingly positive response to this idea, which will be explained in the paper. Of course, instructor enthusiasm adds to the favorable student response, but the element of surprise in hearing about a brand new way of learning is a big contributor, too.

One of the common learning outcomes in marketing programs is related to critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Taylor 2003). Numerous studies in the marketing education literature have discussed the importance of these cognitive skills (Cooper and Loe 2000; Smart, Kelley and Conant 1999). The question always remains how to improve student CT skills. Typically case analysis, simulations, client projects and other experiential learning assignments are thought to stimulate CT. In their discussion of critical thinking theory, Frontczak and Daughtrey (2004) suggest numerous factors that contribute to a classroom that promotes CT: an interactive atmosphere, topics that engage student interest, the instructor as less of an authority figure, and time for the student to reflect. "Theme Days" offered both the "element of surprise" and the opportunity for critical thinking. This paper will: (1) discuss the significant aspects of CT theory, (2) present the concept of "Theme Days," (3) analyze results of the effectiveness of this new concept, and (4) offer recommendations to those considering using the "Theme Days" experiential learning technique.

CRITICAL THINKING THEORY

In the book, *Developing Critical Thinkers*, Brookfield (1987) discusses the importance of critical thinking in our society. "Critically reflective teachers are likely to foster classrooms in which challenge and excitement are found" (Brookfield p. 43). He also reviews several aspects to the process of critical thinking: (1) a degree of ambiguity is important in encouraging CT, (2) a diversity in CT methods is necessary, (3) risk taking is important in CT experiences and (4) the instructor is merely a facilitator in helping students learn. Each of these aspects of CT are important for marketing educators to consider. Harris (2002) discusses the key aspects of a related skill, creative thinking. Some of the behaviors that strengthen creativity are perseverance, the ability to suspend judgment and a mental playfulness. Some of the inhibitors of creative thinking are the beliefs that "I can't do it," "I'm not creative," or "that's childish." As an educator, in

addition to encouraging critical thinking and providing opportunities for critical thinking and creativity, we should model critical thinking and risk taking. Whenever we offer new experiential learning assignments to our students, we are modeling a desired skill.

"THEME DAYS"

The movement away from the traditional lecture by educators and rote memorization by students and toward active, experiential learning in marketing education has created a literature filled with numerous clever experiential assignments. A special issue of the *Journal of Marketing Education* (April 2000) includes seven articles on experiential learning. Frontczak and Kelley (2000) discuss the idea that "at the heart of all experiential learning theory is the basic belief that effective learning occurs when students are actively involved with an experience and then reflect on that experience." The concept of "Theme Days" was created to stimulate learning and critical thinking in an undergraduate Consumer Behavior course. Instead of requiring more traditional multiple choice or essay exams in Consumer Behavior, the instructor proposed "Theme Days," where a small team of students would select a theme and then prepare individual reports according to the assignment. The following goals for the "Theme Days" were explained to the students. These experiences were to provide the students with: (1) an opportunity to apply recently learned concepts in Consumer Behavior to real world situations, (2) time for reflection on these topics/concepts/theories, (3) an opportunity to feel more connected with other students in the program, and (4) a fun experience. Possible "themes" were suggested to the students. For example, students could analyze (1) consumer behavior in coffee shops, (2) fashion trends in a nearby central business district, (3) behavior in fast food restaurants, (4) student behavior in campus establishments, or (5) any other approved team-designed theme. Student designed themes turned out to be more creative than those suggested by the instructor. The following assignment was given to the students:

1. Class period before a theme day:
 - a. Select "team" (3 or 4 students)
 - b. Select "theme" (no more than 2 teams working on the same theme in one day)
 - c. Determine your plan (where to meet)
 - d. Share cell phone numbers (optional)
2. Theme Day:
 - a. Meet at the designated place

- b. Bring a list or summary of concepts recently covered
 - c. Make observations of real life behavior that relate to Consumer Behavior concepts
 - d. Following the theme day experience, write a 4 page report applying your observations to the concepts studied
 3. The three "theme days" reports will be graded on:
 - a. Writing quality:
 - i. Responsiveness to assignment
 - ii. Thorough, detailed
 - iii. Organization
 - iv. Grammar, spelling, mechanics
 - b. Critical Thinking:
 - i. Creativity in application of concepts and theories
 - ii. Clear understanding of concepts
 4. General Guidelines:
 - a. Select different team members for each theme day
 - b. Work on a theme only once
 - c. Plan your theme experience for class time
 - d. No theme days by yourself
 - e. Can use only concepts recently covered for that theme day
 - f. Include team member's names on theme day assignment

The assignment was described in sufficient detail for the students to understand the idea of "Theme Days."

RESULTS

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of "Theme Days," two primary measures were implemented. The first method of evaluation involved asking students in the class to complete a brief survey related to their perceptions of "Theme Days." This survey was based on a form 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). The 17 items related to student learning through the "Theme Days" and their involvement, enjoyability and satisfaction with this experiential method of testing. The second method of assessment involved the educator's evaluation of how a traditional exam in the class related to the three "Theme Day" experiences. The course was arranged so there were no traditional exams, only the "Theme Days." On one of the last days of class the instructor gave the students a "surprise" exam (not always a good idea!) using a sample of the essay exam questions used during the normal semester.

Following the three Theme Day experiences, students were given an evaluation form. Overall, student

perceptions of the "Theme Days" concept were extremely favorable. Mean values for all 17 statements are presented in Table 1. In general, the students thought that Theme Days were:

- Helpful in understanding Consumer Behavior
- Made the course interesting
- Helpful in applying concepts and theories to real life situations
- Enjoyable
- Worth the effort
- A better learning experience than a standard exam

All of the mean values were greater than 7.6 on a 9 point scale, except one, indicating extremely favorable reactions to the new method of assessment. From the students' point of view, they enjoyed this type of exam more than most and thought this provided a more interesting learning situation than a standard exam. They did not necessarily think that Theme Days required more work than a standard exam however. Throughout the term, there were very few complaints or issues with the entire process. The only issue, and it was never a problem, related to the team that included a student with a seeing eye dog. Students then had to consider the location of their theme a little more carefully, especially on extremely hot days due to the hot pavement. Other than that, all students informal comments on their "Theme Days" experience were extremely favorable.

The other method of assessing the effectiveness of Theme Days involved instructor comparison of grades on a standard exam with grades on the Theme Days exams. Before administering the traditional exam, the instructor had several hypotheses related to student performance: (1) students would not do as well on more definitional questions on the traditional exam, because the students did not "study" for the exam since it was given without announcement, (2) students who performed better on the Theme Days assignment would also perform generally better on the standard exam, (3) in general, students would perform better on more conceptual and application type of questions. Although the comparison of Theme Days exams and the traditional exam is not quantitative, here are the results. Prior to the standard exam, the instructor "estimated" how each student in the class would perform based on Theme Day grades. Students were placed into one of three categories: + (estimated the student would do well), 0 (estimated the student would do okay), and - (estimated the student would not do too well). For students in the top half of the grade distribution on the traditional exam: 8 had +, 2 had -, and 2 had 0.

For students in the bottom half of the grade distribution on the traditional exam: 2 had +, 7 had -, and 3 had 0. So previous to the exam, the instructor had "estimated" how well the students would do. The instructor estimated 20 of 24 students correctly. Also, in terms of final course grades, 6 students in the top half of the traditional exam scores received A's and none in the lower half of the distribution received A's. Generally, students who performed better on the Theme Days exams also performed better on a standard exam. One more finding related to grades on Theme Days is that grades improved from Theme Day #1 to Theme Day #3. For Theme Day #1 there were 2 A's, for Theme Day #2 there were 6 A's and, finally, for Theme Day #3 there were 8 A's. Overall this improvement in performance was likely related to student understanding of professor expectations and student interest in improving their personal performance. Of the total of 16 A's for individual Theme Days assignments, nearly all (13) were in the top half of the standard exam grade distribution. The conclusion of the more subjective instructor comparison is that Theme Days grades highly correlated with standard exam grades.

In considering the three previous hypotheses, results provided support for each of the three. (1) In general, students did not do as well on more straight-forward definition questions. For example, they did not perform as well on explaining (similar to defining) informational and normative reference group influence, instrumental and classical conditioning, and the difference between personal influence and word-of-mouth advertising. Each of these questions were more definitional in nature where the instructor would be looking for specific descriptions. (2) As the previous comparison between the traditional exam grades and the "Theme Days" grades showed, there was a high correlation between the two. So, the students who performed better on "Theme Days" also performed better on a standard essay exam providing some degree of validity to Theme Days. (3) Overall, students did perform better on the more conceptual and application oriented questions. For example, in discussing how the family life cycle concept could be used in the development of a marketing strategy or how a marketing manager might use psychographic data, students did well. Since they had spent an entire semester understanding the course concepts and applying them to real life situations through the "Theme Days" experiences, they seemed to perform much better on application questions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

"Theme Days" turned out to be a big hit with the students in Consumer Behavior. In addition, data

suggested that those who performed well on the "Theme Days" assignments also performed better on the standard exam. In the long run do students really remember precise definitions from a course or the learning gained through a memorable, compelling experiential learning exercise? "Theme Days" provided the students with a unique and fun opportunity to creatively interact with other students in the class and then apply the classroom theories to real life experiences. This experiential exercise could likely be used successfully in other marketing courses, such as Retailing, Services Marketing or Sports Marketing. It would also likely work for a more traditional campus or an urban campus with a more diverse group of students, which was the case in this study. Based on this new assignment, there are several recommendations to offer any educator considering using the "Theme Days" exercise: (1) give students precise instructions related to both the experiential process and the written assignment, (2) provide students with a writing rubric they might use as a guide in writing up their Theme Days exam, (3) check student interest in such an assessment measure before using it throughout a whole semester or term, possibly use it for just one exam or one project, (4) assess instructor's personal willingness to move away from the more traditional exam, (5) understand that the grading of Theme Days will be somewhat more subjective than a standard exam, (6) possibly allow students to give a brief presentation of their work where they may get feedback from others in class, (7) use this technique in smaller classes of 40 or fewer students, and (8) appreciate the fact that students are likely both learning from this experience and having fun at the same time. Although most instructors may have their favorite writing rubric, the following dimensions might be considered in grading the Theme Days assignment:

- Completeness: degree to which all elements of assignment are addressed
- Thoroughness: degree to which ideas are well developed
- Clarity: degree to which report stays focused
- Structure: degree to which document is well organized
- Mechanics: proper spelling, grammar, punctuation
- Professionalism: proper use of headings, titles, charts, figures, page numbers

In conclusion, Theme Days was an experiment in Consumer Behavior that seemed to be successful. Both the students and the instructor enjoyed the experiences and learned through this process.

TABLE 1
STUDENT EVALUATION OF THEME DAYS

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

	<u>Mean</u>
1. Theme Days were helpful to me in understanding Consumer Behavior.	8.15
2. They made the course more interesting.	8.92
3. Theme Days allowed me to apply what I learned to real life situations.	8.46
4. I was satisfied with my work on Theme Days exams.	7.69
5. I learned a lot about Consumer Behavior from them.	8.00
6. I was highly involved with Theme Days.	8.58
7. The Theme Days experience was enjoyable.	8.69
8. It promoted better student/professor relationships.	7.88
9. I believe Theme Days provided a valuable measure of my learning.	7.81
10. They were not boring.	8.58
11. I enjoyed working on the Theme Day exam more than most.	8.23
12. I would recommend this type of experience to other marketing students.	8.46
13. It was worth the effort.	8.38
14. Theme Days suggests the professor cares about me learning Consumer Behavior.	8.42
15. It provided me with a more interesting learning situation than a standard exam.	8.73
16. Theme Days required more work than a standard exam would have.	5.38
17. Overall, this experiential exam was a better learning experience than a standard exam.	8.65

REFERENCES

- Brookfield, Stephen. 1987. *Developing critical thinkers*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Cooper, Marjorie J., and Terry W. Loe. 2000. Using the theory of constraints' thinking processes to improve problem – solving skills in marketing. *Journal of Marketing Education* 22(2): 137-46.
- Frontczak, Nancy T., and Clay Daughtrey. 2004. An application of critical thinking principles to marketing education: The student-driven, syllabus. *Proceedings of the Marketing Educators' Association conference*. Las Vegas, NV: 36-42.

- Frontczak, Nancy T., and Craig A. Kelley. 2000. Special issue on experiential learning in marketing education. *Journal of Marketing Education* 22(1): 3-4.
- Harris, Robert A. 2002. *Creative problem solving: A step-by-step approach*. Los Angeles, CA: Pycszak Publishing.
- Karns, Gary L. 2005. An update of marketing student perceptions of learning activities: Structure, preferences, and effectiveness. *Journal of Marketing Education* 27(2): 163-71.
- Pine, B. Joseph, and James H. Gilmore. 1999. *The experience economy*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
- Sandler, Dennis, and Michael A. Kamins. 1987. Cognitive and affective dimensions of educational objectives. Scale development and measurements. *Journal of Marketing Education* (Fall): 20-31.
- Smart, Denise T., Craig A. Kelley, and Jeffrey S. Conant. 1999. Marketing education in the year 2000: Changes observed and challenges anticipated. *Journal of Marketing Education* 21(3): 206-16.
- Taylor, Kimberly A. 2003. Marketing yourself in the competitive job market: An innovative course preparing undergraduates for marketing careers. *Journal of Marketing Education* 25(2): 97-107.
- Wood, Charles M., and Tracy A. Suter. 2004. Making marketing principles tangible: Online auctions as living case studies. *Journal of Marketing Education* 26(2): 137-44.