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ABSTRACT

With the prospect of continued limited resources and with the increased amount of material that is relevant to the preparation of an undergraduate student in marketing, the basic curriculum in marketing should be constantly monitored for possible areas to achieve efficiencies. If we carefully review the stage in the development of the material in the consumer behavior area and the current state of the art in marketing research, and compare these situations with the needs of the undergraduate student in the marketing area, a significant reduction in the resources allocated to each of these topics is possible. This integration can be accomplished in a process that makes the final result a more useful experience for the undergraduate student.

INTRODUCTION

This paper suggests a modification of the traditional approach to teaching the undergraduate courses in marketing research and consumer behavior. The proposed change is based on two observations. First, most of the students who are required to take the undergraduate marketing research course are not going to be marketing researchers. Their relationship with marketing research is more likely to be as user of the output, rather than as developer of the input. Second, a majority of the material found in the undergraduate course in consumer behavior that has immediate relevance to marketing decision making and application has found its way into other required courses in the marketing curriculum. Some representative examples in introductory texts would include: McCarthy and Perreault (1984, Part II); Mentzer and Schwartz (1985, Part Two); Cundiff, Still, and Govoni (1985, Part Two); Murphy and Enis (1985, Part 3); Evans and Berman (1985, Part Two); and Schoell (1985, Chapters 5 and 6). This consumer behavior material is also covered in texts that might be used for more advanced courses for the marketing majors. Some illustrative examples are: Buell (1984, Chapters 4 and 5); Lilien and Kotler (1983, Chapters 7, 8 and 9); and Ring, Newton, Borden, and Biggadike (1984, Chapter 1).

Based on these observations the author feels that perhaps it is time to reexamine these two areas. A better utilization of the limited resources available to most schools might be obtained by combining the two courses into one. Those who have taught either or both of these courses are likely to have a negative reaction to the suggestion of combining two courses that currently may not seem to have adequate coverage as separate courses. However, a careful evaluation of what the undergraduate marketing student really needs from these two important areas

may alter our traditional perspective. Support for the proposed approach begins with the fact that the consumer is the primary focus of a major portion of the marketing research that is conducted. To this we add the reality that most marketing graduates, particularly at the Bachelor level, will not be involved in multivariate analysis or other sophisticated data analysis or research design techniques. They do need to be aware of these tools and their appropriate application and interpretation, somewhat as a driver must understand an automobile. Obviously this is considerably different from the knowledge required by the engineer who designs an automobile. That is, they need to understand the value of the information generated and the general constraints that apply to the generation of data, but typically they do not need a mastery of the techniques utilized in developing that information. In addition, with the wide spread use of personal computers and the availability of sophisticated data analysis software, statistical techniques as a focus of attention are likely to become more and more an area for specialists.

DESCRIPTION OF THE APPROACH

For the past two years the author has been teaching an undergraduate course called Consumer Analysis and Marketing Information Systems. The orientation of this course has been to view marketing research as a tool that the marketing decision maker has at his disposal to better develop his overall marketing strategy. In our curriculum, as appears to be common practice, the basic concepts of consumer decision making are introduced in the introductory marketing class. In the proposed modification this initial exposure to consumer decision making is strengthened to the degree necessary to deal with specific marketing problems. In the classroom setting, these marketing decision problems are presented, primarily in the form of cases. Basic research procedures are introduced and immediately applied to specific problems arising from case analysis.

Thus, the three major pedagogical components of the course are: (1) material on consumer behavior (organized to facilitate comprehension with an appropriate consumer decision model), (2) material on basic research techniques, i.e., problem definition, sample design, data gathering instruments, data analysis, and report preparation and (3) actual marketing problems (presented in cases - with a research focus or orientation).

A MODIFICATION OF PERSPECTIVE

A critical factor in designing this course is to determine the theoretical depth necessary for the undergraduate marketing student. How much exposure is necessary into the derivation of consumer decision models and the extensive, but rather loosely focused related literature from the behavioral sciences, to provide an adequate background for a student to conceptualize and intelligently work through marketing decision problems?

As marketing scholars we appreciate total conceptual models and a near exhaustive exploration of why something happens. It is our responsibility to develop and test explanatory models. However, the benefit to the decision maker is the resulting generalizations and the limitations that constrain the application of those generalizations. The situation in utilizing the behavioral sciences is similar to the decision that must be faced in teaching statistics. How much does the individual who is responsible for making decisions based on the results of data analysis need to know about the derivation of and justification for a particular statistical technique? In viewing this design question it is important to differentiate between "ideal" (the end user should understand the total process) and what is operationally realistic.

SPECIFICS OF THE COURSE

The course begins with an overview of the nature and role of marketing research in an organization. Then the dimensions of consumer analysis are reviewed and expanded as initially required. Finally the relationship between consumer analysis and marketing research is developed. After this general introduction, which should involve 8-10% of the course, the student is required to analyze a case requiring the development of a marketing program. The choice of this first case is very important. The case selected should be comprehensive but the nature and extent of the information provided should leave many areas of uncertainty in the minds of the marketing decision maker. The author has found that any of the cases in part 8 of Blackwell, Engel and Talarzyk (1985) or the Gillette Safety Razor Division in Corey, Lovelock and Ward (1981, pp. 7 - 19) work well as an initial case.

The purpose of this initial pragmatic activity is through personal experience to develop a sensitivity in the student to the frustration that occurs when an individual is faced with the need to make decisions with less than adequate information. After this experience the student is more receptive to a discussion of ways to cope with this frustration. The simple approach of asking, "With which of the decisions you had to make in your marketing program do you feel the most uncomfortable?", can start the process of focusing the students attention on the need for information.

After the student has identified the major decis-

ion problem, you can follow with the question, "What kind of information would you need to feel more comfortable with this decision?" When the student has responded to that question you can indicate that the process the two of you have participated in is the same process that a wise marketing researcher will try to initiate with the marketing decision maker who has indicated a desire for research to help solve a problem. This interaction illustrates the difficulty as well as the importance of a careful and clear definition of the management problem that the subsequent research is expected to aid in solving.

After this initial groundwork, you can begin to discuss the research design. This discussion should proceed in a similar, easily understood, and focused manner. First the specificity of the research problem can be discussed. Approaching the development of the research design in this way clearly establishes the point that there is a difference between the decision problem and the research problem. It results in recognizing that the results of the research will very likely be something less than a total solution to the management decision problem. This limitation is a fact of life that exists if for no other reason than that "perfect information" about future conditions is not obtainable. Developing an awareness of this difference between research results and decision needs is critical to generating realistic expectations on the part of all parties involved, regarding the role of research in the decision making process. It also sets the stage for a discussion of the necessity to adequately consider the current state of the art in research procedures and what is capable of being done, at what cost.

Once the research problem is clearly understood, the student can be helped to discover that the logical next step in the research design is to identify the questions that need to be answered to solve the research problem. These questions provide the outline for designing data gathering instruments, as well as identifying the appropriate sources for answers. That is, where (secondary research) and/or from whom (population definition, for primary research) can the answers to these questions be obtained. Once these guidelines are developed the specifics of sample design, questionnaire design, the mechanics of data gathering, and pre-analysis data validation and organization can be dealt with to the depth that seems appropriate for the students involved. The primary criteria for this depth decision is providing adequate information for the decision to be made.

Data analysis is a difficult area for most students. In this approach it can be dealt with by having them now consider the original research problem and the nature or form the data must be in to solve that problem. This helps the student see that data analysis is not a mystical process that only a limited number of initiated people can understand. Rather the student sees data analysis in its proper role. That role is as a tool or process for developing information

to make a specific management decision. This information is derived from the answers to specific research questions. The answers are the raw data that has been gathered following guidelines that were developed from an initial consideration of the management decision to be made.

Finally, the presentation of the research report is guided by a return to the management decision problem (not the research problem). The initial discussions with the decision maker trying to choose between two or more alternatives resulted in a specific statement of what information was required to reduce the uncertainty in making that choice, as well as an indication of what form that data should take to be most useful in making the decision. These are the guidelines for developing the final research report. With this focus on the management decision to be made it then seems natural that the description of, justification for, and other technical items related to the research process may be omitted in some reports, or when included, placed in an appendix.

JUSTIFICATION FOR THIS MODIFICATION

This proposed approach to introducing students to the research process has the advantage of presenting an integrated whole, as opposed to disconnected parts. It highlights the purpose of research as a tool to aid in decision making. It clearly shows that the management decision the research is being conducted to facilitate should provide the guidelines for the various technical research related decisions that have to be made during the research design and implementation processes. Presenting the research process in the fashion described also helps the student who is more likely to be a user rather than a provider of research to understand what can be expected and perhaps more importantly, what can not be expected from research. This integrated approach has the advantage of highlighting the things a manager/decision maker can do to facilitate and enhance the benefits of the research process.

Detailed discussion and development of the various phases of the research process are dealt with over the span of the course. Topics in consumer behavior are interspersed with the material on research techniques. This is more similar to how they will be used rather than how the topics are developed in the literature. The organizational framework for the introduction of consumer decision making concepts can best come from some commonly accepted model of the consumer buying decision process, such as Engel and Kollat (1982) or Howard and Sheth (1969), or if one wanted to place a strong emphasis on computer simulation, the Nicosia (1966) model could be used as the organizing framework.

The important point is that, in addition to introducing the concepts of consumer behavior to the student, this material is also used as a vehicle for applying the research concepts being studied. For example, a topic in consumer behavior that would probably be introduced early in the course would have to do with social and cultural influences on the individual consumer decision process. Students could be required to prepare a bibliography on this topic and then select three to six works from that bibliography and develop a literature review. In meeting this assignment the students would be involved in the literature of a significant topic in consumer behavior at the same time they were experiencing the research techniques involved in secondary data gathering. This early exercise provides the student with experiential exposure to the process of doing the preliminary research that usually precedes the development of research problem statements. Class discussion after this assignment was completed would then round out the necessary background preparation in the area of social influences on the consumer decision process.

If experience with experimental research designs is desired, a later assignment could be something like:

"After examining the literature on perceptions and learning, select a problem in either area and prepare an experimental design to increase our knowledge in this problem area."

To perform well on this assignment the student must get into the literature on perceptions and learning and study it carefully enough to recognize what is known and what is not known. After this level of awareness is accomplished, he still must work with the material enough to put together a logical experimental design, which will obviously require consideration not only of the major concepts but their dimensions and elements as well. In addition the student is faced with considering the direction of cause and effect, as well as the logic of predictions based on that direction.

In my classes an assignment similar to those described above is made about once a week. By the time the term is completed the student should be ready to prepare a complete research proposal. An example of such an assignment would be:

"Please prepare a research proposal in the area of 'cognitive dissonance'. This proposal must be in enough detail so that it could be evaluated for funding."

I have also found it useful to either have an ongoing group project during the entire course or as an alternative an intensive group project during the last week. This should be a simple project, the main purpose of which is hands-on experience. As an example I recently assigned the following for the last week of the term:

"Your group is to design, carry out and prepare a written report on the results of a price comparison study for a 'typical food basket' in local food stores."

If time permits another useful experiential dimension can be added by having some or all of the groups present their research report orally to the rest of the class.

A case book such as Blackwell, Engel and Talarzyk (1985), gives you the opportunity to deal with specific issues of research related to consumer analysis in a more structured and controlled manner. The cases are selected and worked into the course design for desired emphasis and control over topics being explored.

SUMMARY

The course briefly described above provides little opportunity for the student to become bored. The required workload is relatively heavy but contains a large amount of variety. While a fair amount of conceptual material is dealt with, it is always done with a pragmatic or application objective clearly indicated. Students have never described the assignments as "busy work." From a pedagogical viewpoint it offers an attractive blend of conceptual and pragmatic material at a level that students can grasp and experience. From our experience with this approach it seems to be a better use of scarce classroom resources for the undergraduate student considering the Bachelor degree in marketing as a terminal degree.

At the same time the student who may be considering continuing their education through some level of graduate work has not only been exposed to the basic concepts of research, but has also had the experience of applying those concepts in a situation providing close to immediate feedback. This required application and critique in a relatively low risk setting seems to result in a good foundation for future more sophisticated training in scientific research.

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