

USING FOCUSED MINI-CASES AS A TEACHING TOOL – AN EXAMPLE OF POLISH COMPLAINT BEHAVIOR

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INTRODUCTION

Reaching students has always some creativity in lesson planning. Students learn by different methods and just as an advertiser uses a variety of media to embed the message in the consumer's mind, an instructor uses different techniques to do the same in a student's mind. Students have been exposed to marketing, advertising, personal selling and the like their entire life. As marketing instructors, we attempt to teach them the correct terminology for phenomena they most likely have been exposed to before. We also try to take them behind the scenes to explain the "whys," the reasoning and psychology behind the things that marketers do. Through the course of a semester or a quarter, we lead them from the "it's just an ad (or product, or how people do things, etc.)" mentality to "I'll never look at an ad (product, etc.) the same way again."

In addition, the last decade or so has seen a strong focus on the global economy. No longer is it sufficient for a student to understand how to reach the US consumer, how the US consumer's thought processes tend to work, and what sorts of appeals are likely to reach this US consumer and so on, but he or she needs to understand the differences throughout the world. As instructors, more and more we are called upon to deliver this knowledge. To a student that is just beginning understands how things work in his or her environment, asking them to conceive of the variations around the world can be daunting.

As an instructor, it is often easy to say, "Everything we've just talked about – well, all bets are off internationally," and give a few examples. Often that is what our textbooks do, tacking a couple paragraphs at the end of a chapter and maybe – if it is a better textbook – a boxed vignette describing an example of the difference. One problem is that it underemphasizes the variety and complexity of the differences – the world becomes an afterthought (incidentally promoting more American ethnocentrism). Another option is to tell the student that he or she will get a better opportunity to explore these differences when they take the international marketing/selling/consumer behavior/distribution class and let that instructor deal with it if and when

the student takes the class. A better option, if it fits the time frame, is to assign a research paper/group project/article review that looks into some of the differences. This pushes the onus of learning back onto the student, but, at least, does not try to completely sidestep the issue.

These are the easy options, but not the most satisfying for an instructor and certainly not the best learning options for a student. The thorough job we would like to do is hampered by the time constraints of a quarter or semester. The specialized upper level classes we offer to give more in-depth looks at some of these areas often do not attract enough students to be able to hold the class, and, even if we get enough students, there are so many of our major who cannot (or will not) find the time to take the class.

TEACHING WITH FOCUSED MINI-CASES

The solution offered here is not a perfect answer, but is one that has worked well for me. The basic outline is to teach the US-oriented material, then to focus with some depth on one international country or region. Typically, I would spend about 1/3 of the time on chapter material (assuming the students will have read and understood much of it) and the remaining on exploring the international differences. Throughout the quarter or semester, as the topics change, the region or country also changes so as to not to become an "area studies" class and to expose students to more cultures. From a class preparation viewpoint, this is also incredibly helpful as the instructor need not be an authority on a particular country but can use the materials he or she can find.

In addition, I have found it useful to switch towards a more case-oriented approach. I do not need to go through, for example, the steps in making a purchasing decision, but if I give stories about how the steps are followed in another culture, students can see the differences in order or the missing steps and the like. Stories are entertaining; students tend to relax, listen more closely and usually learn without always realizing they are learning. There is certainly background material to be provided to help the students understand why things are different, but I try to do this after they have found the differences.

This is not simply using a case study. First of all, it is difficult if not impossible to find international cases that cover all the key concepts you might choose to teach this way. Secondly, most case studies are more in-depth and complex than necessary for the sort of teaching I am advocating. Thirdly, the length of time to adequately discuss most cases can take most of a class period or more.

How does this work? I use a series of small – one paragraph to half page – “caselets” interspersed with international theory and bits of background information on the country involved. I tell a story or two, offer some of this background information, and explain a bit of theory to start. At this point, the class becomes more interactive; I’ll offer more stories and inquire why the character took such action. As needed, I’ll add more country background and theory for structure.

In the next part of the paper, I have provided a portion of the material I use to teach consumer complaint behavior in this method. You will find a series of smaller “caselets” describing examples of Polish complaint behavior along with bits of theory, country information and references to provide additional background. It is not a “ready to give” class, but indicates the flavor of the project.

From where do the stories come? The sources are limitless. The “doing business in _____” articles in popular press often include some stories, as do international business textbooks, some academic journals, newspaper articles, Internet and the like. Vacations or business travel offer opportunities to do some ethnographic research or interviews. Colleagues often have “war stories” from trips they have made. International colleagues, friends and students can offer insight and additional material. In some cases, it is easy to “fictionalize” stories based on a set of facts or an article, but much care must be taken when doing this so as not to introduce any bias. I use this as only a last resort.

I usually start a clipping file on a topic and as I find I have several stories on the same (or closely related) topic from one country or region, I start a more concerted effort on gathering additional material. A literature review of international theory – if any – can offer structure for organization. Additional literature review provides the country background to help explain.

WHAT MAKES THIS DIFFERENT FROM THE ANECDOTES WE ALL USE?

We all collect and use stories from our experience, from our readings, and from many other sources. Generally, though we tend to almost randomly toss them into our lecture; a topic we’re discussing will remind us of one of these stories and off we go. Our favorites are repeated enough to become part of our “canned” lecture. In this method, the lecture comes first and the anecdotes are interspersed as we remember them or through habit.

Another common usage, but a bit more planned is when we seek out an example to explain a particularly difficult concept. This does require more forethought, but we are not necessarily concerned about what part of the world the story comes from, but whether it solves our problem. In both cases, students may hear a dozen or so illustrations, but from different parts of the world.

There are two differences I see. The first is in the focus of the cases. They are chosen as a series of illustrations about a particular topic from one place. Instead of the crazy quilt of tidbits from all around the world, I try to weave a more in-depth lesson of the topic from one country. A story from Poland, for example, by itself, can illustrate a difference, but why is there this difference? What causes this deviation from our expectations? Is it limited to just one story/situation or is more interwoven into other Polish situations? The focus makes this more of a rifle approach rather than a shotgun approach.

The second difference is in the planning. This is not a single example to explore a troublesome concept. This is a series of cases that build upon each other to more fully explore a particular group of concepts. The cases are ordered to lead the student logically from one conclusion to the next. We’re building a bridge across the river, not throwing random rocks into the river.

AN EXAMPLE: POLISH COMPLAINT BEHAVIOR

For readability, the stories have been italicized and the teaching note/discussion areas are not. In addition, “Story” and “Discussion” subheading have been used to help separate the two items. As mentioned above, this is only a portion of a lesson plan.

Previous Learning:

Students should be familiar with post-purchase behaviors and the idea of cognitive dissonance. They should have an understanding of typical complaint behaviors – exit, voice and loyalty (Hirschman 1970).

Teaching Notes:

Story 1: *A joke from Communist times: Three ladies are standing in a long line outside a shop in Warsaw sometime in the 1970's. A foreign journalist asked them why they were waiting. The first woman says, "This shop has shoes, but only size 38. I wear size 40, but if I cut out the heels, they will work."*

The second woman agrees that she is also waiting for the size 38 shoes, but adds, "I wear size 36, but if I stuff them with paper, they will do."

The third woman exclaims, "Size 38?!" She slowly shakes her head and walks away.

"She must be waiting for the store to carry her size," the journalist surmises.

"Oh, no," replies the first woman. "She wears size 38 and her feet wouldn't understand."

Story 2: *An American was teaching Total Quality Management in Poland in the mid-1990's. She stated that an unhappy customer would tell eight to ten people about a dissatisfactory product. Polish audiences were incredulous. They would ask, "Why would you let anyone know you had done anything so stupid as to buy something defective?" When queried further as to what they would do, they would answer, "Nothing," or "Fix/live with the problem." Some would try to avoid shopping there again (those in major metropolitan areas where there was more choice) and only rarely would anyone suggest any sort of verbal response.*

Story 3: *A friend opened a sealed container of yogurt in the store where she had just purchased it. Finding it moldy and obviously inedible, she threw it away. When asked about it, she replied, "I decided I really didn't want it." This phenomenon happened frequently: the consumer would avoid making a judgment about the product, but remained perfectly truthful in admitting not using the product. Even a direct question, "Is it bad?" would usually elicit a non-answer, "I prefer XYZ," a reluctant "perhaps," or possibly, "I don't care for it," implying that others might. Since a well-known Western company produced it, I suspected that the store had sold expired product. I retrieved the carton and quickly confirmed this, but I was startled by her reaction. Instead of righteous indignation or irritation, she was deeply embarrassed that I had caught her doing something stupid.*

Discussion: By now most students realize that voice seems to be an option not used often by the Poles. Although not clearly outlined in the above examples, exit may be used in some cases (story2) and

perhaps, loyalty. Why would they be loyal to obviously poor products? Several answers are likely to come up. One answer is that there may not be a history or culture of returning products or complaining. This is an opportunity to explain the Communist shortage system (see, for example Feick, Coulter & Price, 1995; Feick & Gierl, 1996; Kozminski, 1992) already alluded to in story 1 and again in stories 4 and 5, following.

Story 4: *Americans living in Poland often gather to discuss their experiences. All of the expatriates have had several episodes when they decided to return a product or issue a verbal complaint to a merchant of service provider. The response tended to fall into one of two categories: (1) the merchant would become belligerent, rude and loud, stating that the customer was to blame, it was not their fault, and there was nothing they could do; or (2) the merchant would become upset, confused and embarrassed, possibly correcting the problem, but avoiding the complainer whenever (s)he might return.*

Story 5: *Gosia was showing her friends her new shoes. The stitching on one was marred and showed rather conspicuously. When she saw that I noticed this defect she immediately spoke up, "I had to buy them; someone else was waiting to see them."*

Discussion: Another typical answer is that Polish people are too stupid to know poor quality. As stated, this is not true, but it opens the door to talk about customer sophistication, experience and customer expectations (Day, et al, 1981; Oliver & DeSarbo, 1988; Bearden, 1983; Gronhaug & Zaltman, 1981; Richens, 1983; Westbrook, 1980.

Story 6: *At an expensive Warsaw restaurant, Jurek discretely pulled a long hair from his zurek (sour soup). A few minutes later, he found another in his cabbage. I suggested that he should say something to the waiter, giving reasons from health concerns to the amount of money we were spending for this meal, but I could see I was getting nowhere. Finally, I asked if he liked finding hair in his food. He responded that he had never really thought about it, "But why say anything? Hair falls out. Today it is my soup, tomorrow it will be someone else's."*

Story 7: *Under the Communist regime any promotional activities were either propaganda or an effort to move a poor, non-selling product. For example, milk could always be purchased fresh on the farms, but the Polish people have become accustomed to purchasing pasteurized, homogenized, packaged milk. This milk was almost*

always unbranded – the local dairy being the only source. In the mid-1990's, branded milk is everywhere – not only whole milk, but 0.5% and 1.5% fat version, UHT (ultra-high pasteurized, extended shelf life) milk, flavored milks and other versions. Branded milk ads are on the radio, TV, magazine and billboards and the Polish consumer is overwhelmed and suspicious. More and more frequently, you will see them queued up with their bottles or tins, buying fresh from the back of a farmer's wagon.

Discussion: Another reason relates to the traditional way of shopping. In Poland, most products are behind counters where, if a customer can get a salesperson to acknowledge his presence – no certain fate – and asks politely, the clerk will hand over the item indicated to the customer. The particular item offered will be the one easiest to reach. It may be dusty or broken or have pieces missing. It might not even be the product requested. It may have passed its expiration date months ago. It is up to the customer to determine the quality of the product and accept or reject it. If the customer rejects the first article, the salesperson may decide it is too much trouble to hand another one for inspection, or (s)he may grudgingly give the customer one more chance. Once the transaction has been completed, the product is the customer's responsibility. If the customer notes a problem while waiting for his/her change, it is already too late. It is very much a "let the buyers beware" society (Gajewski 1992; Johnson & Johnson 1993).

Story 8: Often consumer would pick up one brand of a product and carefully consider it, then pick up a second brand and repeat their perusal. The second one would go into their basket and the consumer would start to leave, only to return moments later and exchange the product for the first brand. One woman switched between two brands of shampoo six times before (randomly?) grabbing a third brand and leaving.

Story 9: Agneszka wanted to buy shoes. First, she had to wait for the clerk who had sat down for a tea break. The clerk rose, showing reluctance and disinterest in her entire body language. The Polish language allows for several degrees of politeness in "please" and "thank-you," and Agneszka used the most polite forms in asking to see a particular shoe. Again, the clerk, without saying a word – her tea was cooling – showed how put out she was to bend over and retrieve the shoes from under the glass countertop. Agneszka examined the shoes and asked in her most subservient tones if she could please see the shoe in a size 36. The silent clerk

glared at Agneszka and leaned over once more to pull out the requested size. Agneszka was "terribly, terribly sorry" but, although similar, these were not the same shoes and "if she would be so kind" could she see the proper shoes in a size 38. Agneszka even located the pair she wanted and pointed them out to the clerk. The clerk nearly threw the shoes in question at Agneszka and stomped back to her chair. Agneszka waited quietly while the clerk slowly finished her tea and herbatniki (cookies) and then asked in her most polite way if she could please buy these shoes. Even then, the clerk hauled herself from her chair, complained that Agneszka did not have the exact change and was generally unpleasant. Unfortunately, Agneszka's experience was not atypical in traditional Polish stores.

Discussion: Insight into the Polish history will show that this is an often conquered country. Since its founding over 1000 years ago, the country has frequently been conquered and controlled. Over the last 200 years, Poland has only existed as an independent country briefly between the two World Wars and recently. "Good" things have been taken away from them many times. Often they have been in the position where someone else tells them what is good for them. Due to this, Polish people tend to have a feeling of victimization. A poor quality purchase may receive less attention because it is "expected." Their history also partially explains their reluctance to venture out and try new things. Those who were different or dared to complain were usually hammered into submission. The easiest path to take is that of routine.

Story 10: The quality control expert continued her example by "opening" a fruit stand in class, displaying beautiful apples. When one of her "customers" would "purchase" one of her wares, she would reach under the counter for a wormy one, or a partially rotten one, or one with a few bites missing. Even in a friendly, role-playing setting, American customers would complain. Polish customers would usually gingerly take their substandard products and return to their seat. Additionally, they missed the point of the exercise: they thought she was trying to teach them to be specific in asking for what they wanted ("I want THIS apple"). A confederate would be enlisted to open a competing fruit stand and the seminar participants would "buy" fruit again. Invariably, almost everyone would come to the first fruit stand rather than investigate the competition. When questioned as to why they did not try out the other stand, they just assumed that the other seller would be just as likely to try to sneak in bad fruit or harass them when they complained. Even when the role-play was set up so that the other competitor

was obviously giving only good fruit and the first was attempting to get rid of bad, few would change lines.

Discussion: Satisfaction has also been explained by having an experience where the positives outweigh the negatives (Oliver, 1993). The following story shows the interplay of status symbols and quality on satisfaction.

Story 11: *Beata came to work one day proud of her new hair color. She had joined the burgeoning ranks of Polish women who chose a variety of unnatural red shades available. My Western colleagues and I were somewhat at a loss for words to give her the compliments she so clearly expected. Finally, one asked if she was not somewhat upset by the clearly unnatural color and the blatant dye job. "Oh," she admitted, "of course it's unnatural, but now people know that I can afford it."*

Discussion: If time permits, an article by Day, et al (1981) expands the exit, voice, and loyalty options into parts. Exit can be exiting a brand, exiting a product class or exiting a retail establishment. Voice includes to friends and family, to retail establishments, to manufacturers and to third-partiers (e.g., Better Business Bureau, lawsuits). Literature on Poland, some cited above, addresses some of the problems with these. The following stories also illustrate some of the issues.

Story 12: *For many products, brands are not discernable. For example, cheese is sold to stores in 3-kilo blocks and cut to order. After the first cut, most labeling has been destroyed and the product is only identified by the type only – Edam, Gouda, etc. The Gouda made by one manufacturer may be of consistently poorer quality than another manufacturer's, but the consumer has no way of knowing which brand he is purchasing.*

Story 13: *Wladek, the manager of a popular pizza restaurant, crowded as many tables as he could onto an outside terrace, including a row right on the edge. There was no wall, no rail, not so much as a curb separating the customers from a drop to the sidewalk six feet below. We asked him whether he was concerned with liability issues, especially as his establishment served alcohol. He could not believe that in the U.S., a restaurant owner could be held responsible for a customer's "stupidity" in falling off a terrace, drunk or not.*

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

For this particular lesson plan, I have twenty-six stories. Several cover similar issues and I tend to

rotate them in and out each quarter. Depending on how quickly the class is getting it, I will use more or fewer stories. I also try to replace a story when I can find something new and fresh to keep current.

Two other methods I sometimes use is to hand out a portion of the cases as a reading assignment prior to class and ask the students to consider – in this case – differences in Polish complaint behaviors and why this might be. I have also had groups role play their scene. This latter method can take a little more time but tends to help the students internalize the knowledge.

I do not do this with every, or even most, topics in a quarter. Time is an issue. Finding enough stories from a particular area can be a challenge. Additionally, overuse might make it less fresh and attention-getting for the student.

An instructor cannot give this depth to all countries/cultures in a world, but even doing it for a few countries gives the student not only insight into the basic concept being taught, but also the structure on how he or she might conduct their own investigation into a new culture. In addition, I have found that forcing a student to look at it from a different viewpoint often strengthens his or her understanding of the concept as it applies to the United States, too.

Does it work? Is it worth the trouble/time? My sample is small and my study is not scientific, but where I have used focused cases, I get better exam discussions than where I do not. Recall seems to be better and often students will reuse my stories to illustrate different concepts at later dates. I get a lot of encouraging feedback from the students, many along the lines of "you made it so easy, I didn't realize how much I was learning." After all, isn't that what we're all trying to do?

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