

SHIFTING STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE OF MARKETING: PEDAGOGICAL TOOLS AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

Recent revisions to the definition of marketing have challenged marketing educators on several fronts. This paper summarizes the essential elements of the new definition of marketing and presents a series of pedagogical tools used to enhance students' understanding of this shift in perspective.

INTRODUCTION

The history of marketing thought and practice is rich and multifaceted. This paper discusses a three part series of activities that encourage students to understand marketing as an activity that is broader in scope and application than previously defined, and one which emphasizes a greater role and responsibility in society.

THE DEFINITION OF MARKETING

In 2004, the American Marketing Association released a new definition of marketing as follows:

Marketing is an organizational function and a set of processes for creating, communicating, and delivering value to customers and for managing customer relationships in ways that benefit the organization and its stakeholders.

A special section in the *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing* summarized various viewpoints as to the strengths and weaknesses of the definition and its implications for scholarship and practice (Gundlach, 2007). Ultimately, the discourse prompted another revision of the definition revealed in 2007:

Marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large.

The recent revision incorporates subtle yet significant changes to the language and perspective that suggest important directions for marketing curriculum and instruction. In their commentary on the new definition, Gundlach and Wilkie (2009) refer to the perspective as an "aggregate conception of

marketing," one which defines the domain of marketing well beyond the responsibilities of a single firm and/or marketing manager. Indeed, instead of being positioned as an organizational function, marketing should be viewed as a pervasive activity which influences all aspects of our world and society. Educators must devise new ways to emphasize that marketing activities exist as part of a highly interconnected system of individuals, institutions, and processes.

This shift in perspective is not an entirely new challenge for marketing educators as sustainability and corporate social responsibility (CSR) also suggest a need to broaden students' perspectives on how marketing activities affect societal growth and development. Kashyap, Mir and Iyer (2006) posited socially responsible behavior as an integral antecedent of companies' pursuit of competitive advantage as opposed to an afterthought or after the fact gimmick. Bridges and Wilhelm's (2008) work on the integration of sustainability in marketing education provides an excellent foundation for developing curriculum that supports a greater appreciation for the "triple bottom line" and an exploration of its implications for marketers in today's global society.

The authors of this paper draw upon some fundamental principles and resources of others' work on corporate social responsibility and sustainability to create a series of learning activities designed for implementation in undergraduate principles of marketing courses (Albinsson & Perera, 2009; Albinsson, Perera, & Sautter, 2009; Bridges & Wilhelm, 2008; Kashyap, Mir, & Iyer, 2006; Maignan & Ferrell, 2004).

The sequence of activities challenges students to reflect on marketing's broader role and responsibilities in society and asks them to ultimately visualize the supply chain as a value loop encompassing a highly interdependent system of customers, clients, partners and societies whose quality of life will be influenced by the sustainability of corporations' marketing practices.

DEVELOPMENT AND DESCRIPTION OF THE LEARNING ACTIVITIES

The three part learning activities series stemmed from a preliminary assignment given to students in undergraduate marketing and management classes. The assignment, intended to heighten and assess students' sensitivities to sustainability in business activities, involved exposure to a free twenty-minute Internet video, created by Annie Leonard (2007) entitled "The Story of Stuff."

"The Story of Stuff" discusses the traditional supply chain framework of activities related to extraction, production, distribution, consumption and disposal. The narrator tells a story of value creation (and reduction), and challenges the viewer to consider the potential value created and/ or destroyed when changes are made throughout the system. The story emphasizes the implications of globalization, cost externalization, pricing, anti-consumption, closed loop production, and reverse logistics. By exploring the hidden facets of production and consumption of goods in our society, Annie Leonard purports to expose the darker side of the materials economy and sensitize viewers to the need for a different approach in order to create a sustainable world economy.

From a marketing perspective, the video discusses concepts fundamental to marketing management and the marketing mix, including product design and development, cost and pricing processes, promotion goals and issues, and supply chain relationships and functions. The strength of the video is arguably in the provocative tone of its message and the subtle rather than direct reference to marketing principles. Although not specifically intended for marketing instruction, it provides a rich context in which to challenge students to higher levels of learning and reflection than is typical of many materials produced by textbook publishers because it requires the student to make the connections between the content and central principles of marketing.

In the fall 2008 semester, students in an online International Marketing class watched "The Story of Stuff," and provided reactions to the movie in an online discussion forum. Two months after the first assignment, the same students participated in a second assignment where they answered specific questions about CSR, sustainability and their individual lifestyle choices relating to these concepts. At roughly the same time, another instructor/author administered the second assignment to students in a management class who had not watched the movie. The authors/instructors

compared the twenty-one narratives collected from the primed marketing students with fifteen narratives from the unprimed management students. The authors independently content analyzed these narratives through iterative readings for emergent themes.

The preliminary findings reveal that primed students reported distinctly different information from those who were not primed with this movie. Specifically, the primed students expressed comments regarding social responsibility in terms of concerns for society and global community with respect to ethics, and the need for awareness as well as action in their personal and professional lives. Unprimed students, in contrast, expressed social responsibility either in very general terms, or in terms that focused on their own self-interests. The primed students integrated the idea of social responsibility with other concepts they had gleaned from prior experiences and were more concrete in providing details of various socially responsible practices they had adapted since their exposure to "The Story of Stuff."

Based on these initial findings, the authors created an integrative set of learning activities that reinforced students' understanding of the fundamental elements of marketing concepts and activities, while simultaneously shifting their perspective of marketing from a transactions-based business function to a more pervasive societal activity. The ultimate learning sequence included three learning activities.

Activity 1: The intent of the first activity was to heighten students' awareness and knowledge of sustainability and the concept of the triple bottom line. The assignment, given early in the semester after introducing terms such as ethics, CSR and the triple bottom line, required students to view "The Story of Stuff." After viewing the video, students were given a set of questions to reflect upon in a written assignment (available from the authors upon request).

Activity 2: The second activity moved the students from reflection to collaborative discussion to formulate learning goals related to comprehension and application. The exercise helped students better concretize the triple bottom line concept and consider how CSR is more powerful when strategically planned to reinforce and complement brand image. The exercise was introduced halfway through the term after students learned material related to product and price decisions. Students were instructed to visit Nike's Reuse a Shoe website (www.nikereuseashoe.com).

The Nike Program, an excellent example of a closed loop production system, provides video clips of the recycle/reuse process. The site includes information on reverse channels of distribution used to return shoes to the company, and tangential issues related to cost constraints of the program. There are also extensive examples of brand image reinforcement and promotion benefits realized through enhanced community relations and new job creation.

In a class discussion, students were asked the following questions: 1) What economic costs/revenues are associated with the Reuse-a-Shoe program? 2) What costs and/or benefits are created for the environment through the Reuse a Shoe program? 3) What persons/groups (i.e., social equity) are positively or negatively affected by this addition to Nike's activities? and 4) Why is the use of Nike Grind for sports surfaces a better choice than using it for commercial warehouse flooring?

Activity 3: The final activity addressed learning goals related to synthesis and new idea generation. In this exercise, students were given a four-question assignment that focused on a product that each student had purchased or consumed locally. For the selected product, students were instructed to brainstorm a way to "close the loop" to create new value from the disposal of the original product. Each student answered the following: 1) Name the brand of the product/service offering and describe the product offering; 2) Describe the tangible waste materials generated by your consumption; and 3) Describe a strategy to be undertaken by the producer of the local good/service which will "close the loop" on the disposal of waste materials generated by consumption of the product. 4) Explain/describe how the new product or reinvention of the waste will fit in with the mission and vision of the producer's company. Students posted their assignments on a class discussion board.

STUDENT FEEDBACK AND IMPLICATIONS FOR INSTRUCTION

During fall 2009, a class of 264 students completed all activities. The large class size provided data upon which to draw some preliminary insights on students' understanding of sustainable marketing and the broader domain of marketing as a process. We begin with observations regarding pedagogical challenges related to the individual activities and conclude with general statements about emergent themes in the content of the students' responses and the implications of those themes for teaching the new definition of marketing.

Students were particularly challenged by the first learning activity and drawing connections to the triple bottom line. Sustainability definitions focused on the environmental aspects with only vague references to long term consideration of social and economic interests. Similarly, the news stories selected focused on corporate giving and cause-related marketing. The selection of stories often made it difficult for students to relate aspects of the organizational activity to the environmental/social equity/economic consequences long term, i.e., the triple bottom line.

Students reacted very positively to the second learning activity as it made it easier for them to concretize the concept of sustainability through example and discussion. The environmental benefits of the Reuse-A-Shoe program were easily grasped but social equity benefits were also a fruitful point of discussion. Students drew connections to new job opportunities and community benefits to providing recreational facilities for children and young adults. The students also considered the distribution and production challenges alluded to on the site and reflected on how economic constraints limit the growth of the Nike program.

The third learning activity was most revealing in assessing students' understanding of the broadened perspective of marketing activities and sustainability concepts. The students' ideas fell into categories of reduce, reuse, and recycle. Many simply discussed examples of how the company would eliminate unnecessary materials involved in the consumption experience (e.g., replace paper coffee cups with reusable mugs, eliminate excessive packaging) or consumers' role in recycling waste such as aluminum cans, plastic materials and other commonly recycled goods. The majority of responses focusing on reduce and recycle did not actually close the loop by suggesting how the waste materials could be used in the production of subsequent saleable goods/services. Slightly less than half of the students' examples fully closed the loop. The examples of new products created from waste materials included use of cardboard in creating housing insulation mixes, converting old pool covers to greenhouse projects, plastic waste to clothing fibers, and creating wallets and purses from fruit juice and candy wrapper packaging.

A review and reflection on the implementation of these learning activities provided several interesting insights on how to implement them in the future. In both the first and third activities, students' explanation of socially responsible and/or

sustainable activities tended to focus responsibility on a singular entity or individual (i.e., the customer); seldom were students inclined to discuss collective or collaborative activities across organizational partners, clients, and customers. This individualistic bias, while consistent with American culture, may also be indicative of the more traditional approach to business education that has relied on a compartmentalized approach to the roles of, and responsibilities of business functions, partners, and stakeholders. More effort must be placed on discussing marketing as an integrated and pervasive activity that exists outside the organization with responsibilities born for implementation outside the scope of the marketing manager. Marketing must be presented as a societal activity that seeks to create value through the formation of partnerships across the supply chain from extraction through disposition and hopefully into recreation of saleable goods and services.

Students also view sustainability and CSR as financially sacrificial, rather than beneficial, practices; it is “the right thing to do” rather than the profitable thing to do. The students’ “close the loop” ideas were largely presented as created goods/activities that would be donated to community organizations or conducted as part of some philanthropic activity (e.g., give recycled cardboard/insulation materials to Habitat for Humanity activities, donate shredded plastic to garment manufacturer for creating blankets for homeless persons). This mindset, though inspired, missed the opportunity for partnerships with other companies to produce saleable goods. Very few students were able to complete a vision that truly closed the loop (e.g., Wal-Mart partners with Patagonia to incorporate plastic bag waste in creation of new joint clothing line). This last activity, which demonstrates a very high level of learning and creativity, should be an ideal for learning outcomes.

Finally, in terms of the triple bottom line, students easily grasped the ecological benefits of sustainable marketing. However, understanding the long-term implications for social equity was more challenging, particularly in terms of job creation and/or loss; students tended to emphasize benefits to people as tied to ecological improvements. They found it most challenging to understand the economic gains that could stem from socially responsible behaviors. Despite current research findings that socially responsible business activities garner long-term economic benefits (Lockett, Moon, & Visser, 2006), students saw socially responsible behavior as being inconsistent with profit motives. This finding suggests that the marketing management focus

emphasized in basic marketing curriculum has, perhaps unknowingly, undermined the importance of the long-term perspective. Therefore, as educators, we must do more to inform students about the triple bottom line and the fact that responsible business behavior is good ecologically, socially and financially for all stakeholders in the global marketing community.

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