

MARKETING ETHICS AND COMPULSIVE CONSUMPTION

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ABSTRACT

As business executives have come under increased scrutiny due to high-profile scandals, some have expressed concern that the perceived decline in business ethics is linked to an inadequate treatment of the subject in MBA programs and business education in general (Bennis, 2005; Christensen et al., 2007). Formal ethics instruction does indeed appear to be more emphasized at the elite business schools (Cornelius et al, 2007) although its integration into the curriculum is pervasive.

Though some argue that teaching ethics in business school is impractical at best or worse yet impossible (Forbes, 1987), efforts continue to develop fresh and creative approaches to the introduction and discussion of the issue (Weber & Glyptis, 2000; Sims, 2002). If additional ethics material were to be introduced in marketing textbooks, what issues would warrant allocation of precious text space and classroom time?

Psychology and marketing have long partnered in exploring the phenomenon of compulsive consumption. It can be defined as "an uncontrollable drive or desire to obtain, use, or experience a feeling, substance or activity that leads an individual to repetitively engage in behavior that will ultimately cause harm to the individual or others" (Faber & O'Guinn, 1989). The behavior is potentially destructive both psychologically and physically and beyond the control of the person engaging in it. The characteristics are clearly linked to addictive behavior in the following ways: they include a drive, impulse or urge to engage in the behavior, their purveyors deny their harmful consequences, and attempts to control or modify the behaviors often result in failure (Faber, O'Guinn, & Krych, 1987). Perhaps most ominous is Hirschman's observation that there is no known cure for addictive consumption (Hirschman, 1992, p. 25).

Faber et al. (1987) point out that compulsive consumption leads to hiding of purchases, bankruptcy and sometimes even criminal behavior including theft and embezzlement. Easy access to credit cards can fuel overspending (Schor, 1998; D'Astous, 1990) in addition to other negative economical and psychological consequences (O'Guinn & Faber, 1989).

While there is a wealth of data regarding the economic and social costs of the special compulsive consumption case of drug, tobacco and alcohol abuse (Office of National Drug Control Policy, 2004; Saha et al., 2007), only limited research has been conducted to date quantifying the overall costs of addiction to various other kinds of products. For example, some interesting assessments have been made regarding gambling. Grinols (2004) offers the following estimates:

In 2003 dollars, the cost to society of an additional pathological gambler is \$10,330 based on studies performed in the mid-1990s, whereas the cost to society of an additional problem gambler is \$2,945 (p. 167).

Pornography represents another product that has exploited distribution via the Internet to become nearly ubiquitous in its availability. The social costs of compulsive consumption to pornography come in many flavors. Addiction of any type has a profound impact on family relationships and frequently results in members of the family feeling that they are living with a complete stranger (Landau & Garrett, 2008). Landau et al. (2007) observe that "the shame and guilt associated with cybersex is even more profound than that from substance abuse and other addictions." Landau and Garrett (2008) show that these effects "appear to be associated with considerable stress, and may correlate with the breakdown of couple, parent and family relationships." Similar stories ranging from broken relationships and personal tragedy to altered personalities and financial disaster could be cited with diverse other less potentially-addictive products such as video games (Anderson & Bushman, 2001), Internet usage (Young, 1998) and credit cards (Manning, 2000). If one seeks to compare the aggregate social costs of gambling to those of bribery, one soon discovers there is much more documentation on the former. Compulsive consumption clearly belongs in discussions of marketing ethics. The harder decision for authors to make is: what will it replace?

References Available on Request