

LEARNING WHY WE BUY: AN EXPERIENTIAL PROJECT FOR THE CONSUMER BEHAVIOR COURSE

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ABSTRACT

Marketing educators have long recognized the value of student-centered, active learning approaches for engendering students' deep learning of marketing course content. For the past six years, as instructors of university-level consumer behavior courses, we have utilized a semester-long, team-based retail audit assignment that is structured to elicit active student engagement via a concrete, hands-on, real world experience.

This retail audit project enables us to address key student outcomes in the consumer behavior course, most notably: 1) the ability to define and explain basic consumer behavior terms, concepts and theories; 2) the ability to understand and articulate the consumer decision-making process and the major sources of influence on this process; 3) the ability to utilize knowledge to analyze, evaluate, and create consumer-oriented marketing strategies and tactics in a live or "real-world" situation; 4) the opportunity to gain experience and skills in how to design, conduct, and report a research project utilizing one of the three major methods for studying consumers (observation, surveys/interviews, experiments); 5) the students' ability to understand, apply, and synthesize course information with respect to their own shopping and consumption behaviors and, thus, reap the benefits of being more aware and informed consumers throughout their lives.

We present an exposition of the project and its value in a consumer behavior course, including the conceptual perspectives informing our discussion, a description of the project and its execution, and students' perspectives on the project's key benefits. We conclude with results of survey research comparing student responses at the beginning of the term with their evaluations after completing the retail audit that provides more generalizable information about the usefulness of the project in achieving active, deep learning and the course objectives.

Among the conceptual perspectives that provide support for the incorporation of the retail audit in a consumer behavior course are Bloom's Taxonomy, deep learning, and experiential learning. The key student outcomes outlined above reflect our desire to have our students work through virtually all of the

levels in the cognitive domain of Bloom's Taxonomy with respect to consumer decision-making, shopping behavior, and retailer strategies and tactics. Of primary interest to us is fostering in our students a thorough understanding of course concepts, as well as the ability to remember these concepts and use them later, otherwise known as *deep learning*.

The assignment is based on concepts from the book *Why We Buy* by Paco Underhill, which summarizes key findings of Underhill's research in three main areas: (1) consumers' sensory reactions to the physical aspects of store layout and placement of merchandise; (2) psychological reactions to features, placement and packaging of merchandise; and (3) distinctive behaviors of the genders and generations, all concepts relevant to the study of consumer behavior. Over the course of a semester, student teams collect and analyze qualitative and quantitative data on key store atmospherics at a single local retailer and evaluate how these atmospherics affect shopper and buyer behavior. Each team is required to synthesize material from the Underhill book with other course concepts, evaluate the retailer, and deliver a written and oral report that includes results and recommendations for the retailer. Compelled by the requirements of the retail audit's active pedagogy to engage in discovery, students learn not only the "what" and "why" of marketing concepts, strategies, and techniques, but also "how to" implement them.

We have elicited both qualitative and quantitative data from our students regarding what they learned by participating in the project. Results indicate that 1) the project enhanced students' deep learning of the material and their enjoyment of the course; 2) working in teams is challenging, but learning how to manage teamwork is beneficial; 3) conducting an observational research project offers students the opportunity to hone a variety of career-oriented skills; 4) participating in the project has changed the way many students shop. In summary, the scope, structure, and the experiential nature of the retail audit project help our students – and us – to achieve desirable course outcomes.

References available on request