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USING STUDENT EXPERIENCES AS THE BASIS FOR A CONSUMER BEHAVIOR LEARNING EXERCISE

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ABSTRACT

Unlike some courses taught in the business curriculum, students enter the consumer behavior course with an inherent head start on the subject matter. Because part of a student's behavior is that as a consumer, he/she brings to the classroom some years of experience in this role. As a result, concepts discussed in lecture and in the text has an added degree of salience, and are more quickly learned. Rather than being indifferent to the fact that students do bring to the classroom an accumulation of consumption experiences, consumer behavior instructors should consider using those experiences as a basis of further learning. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to offer a means of converting this latent knowledge into an opportunity for an experiential learning exercise.

Introduction

Aside from a few initial lectures and text assignments, many professors structure their topical coverage of consumer behavior around three basic areas: social! interpersonal influences upon consumer behavior, individual influences upon consumer behavior, and the decision-making process of consumer behavior. Using these three areas of topical coverage it is possible to create six assignments that can be of great value to the student.

Administering the Exercises

The first three assignments are given during the first week of class, and are due one week later. Although these assignments will be used later in the semester, they are assigned at the beginning of the term so that students! responses aren't unnecessarily biased due to material covered later. The same prefatory set of instructions is given on each assignment sheet, and reads as follows:

This is an assignment which has no right or wrong answers. The only requirement is that each question be answered as thoroughly as possible. Furthermore, this is an individual assignment. No one can respond to the questions adequately but you, because you are the only one who has the answers. Remember, your grade depends solely upon completeness and thoroughness. Your answers are due at the beginning of next class period.

After these initial remarks the students are presented a series of questions. These questions act as prompts for students to recall a recent consumption/purchase event. The principle difference in the three questionnaires is that they are structured to query the student about a purchase using a social perspective, an individual perspective, and finally from the viewpoint of a decision-making process.

When administering this exercise, thought should be given to the nature of the purchase that students will recall and

report. Without specifying some parameters to the purchase used for the assignment it is likely that many students will report on the purchase of textbooks and school supplies, the gasoline bought for their auto the night before, or some other routinized purchase that will not be rich in the kinds of information sought. Furthermore, because the purchase that is selected by a student forms the basis for all six assignments, it is appropriate that a non-routine purchase be used. Consequently, it is useful if a variety of such purchases are offered to students. Experience in administering this exercise has resulted in the successful use of the following items in generating the quantity and quality of information desired:

cameras
clothes
auto/motorcycle
stereo/ radio! television
apartment selection
university choice (directed toward junior college transfers)

An additional requirement is to specify that the purchase have been made within the last 3 - 6 months. Purchases made in the preceding few months are more likely to be remembered in the detail needed to adequately fulfill the assignment.

To aid in the recall of the purchase event an initial series of actual kinds of questions are asked. Figure 1 contains these series of questions. With the exception of those students using the apartment or university choice as their purchase, all of the questions are fairly straightforward and help students to recall the purchase event. For those students reporting on an apartment or university decision they can simply omit question three.

Figure 1
CONSUMER BEHAVIOR EXERCISE #1
(Preliminary Questions)

1. What was your purchase?
2. How much did it cost?
3. Where did you buy it (community and store)?
4. When did you buy it (date and time of day)?
5. What was the reason(s) you were shopping for this item?

Immediately following the initial set of factual questions of assignment one are questions related to the social/interpersonal influences upon the purchase. Assignments two and three omit the fact-based questions, and proceed immediately to the specific areas of Individual influences and the decision-making processes of consumption. To illustrate the approach of these questions Figure 2 provides examples that may be used. For the benefit of the reader, in parentheses after each question is a reference to the concept being explored by the question.

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Figure 2
CONSUMER BEHAVIOR EXERCISES #1 - #3
(Examples of Depth Questions)

Exercise #1 - Social/Interpersonal Influences

1. Was anyone with you when you made the purchase? (small group relations)
 - If yes 1a. What is your relationship to the person that accompanied you?
 - 1b. How did this individual participate in the purchase?
2. Do you know anyone who used/owned the product before you made your purchase? (reference group influence)
 - If yes 2a. What is your relationship to this person?
 - 2b. What was your reaction when you observed this person using this product?
 - 2c. What was the nature of any conversations you had with this person about the product?

Exercise #2 - Personal/Individual Influences

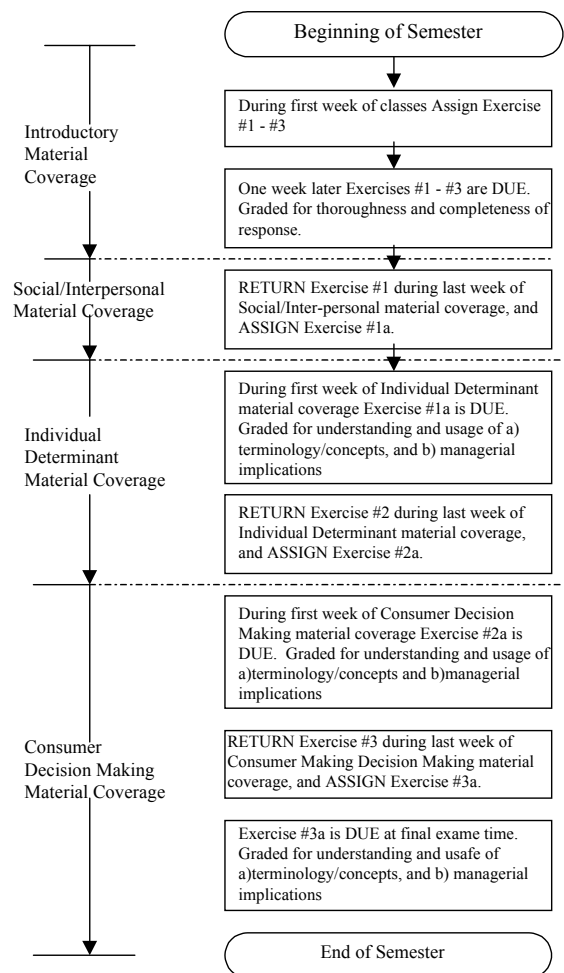
1. How important is this product to your lifestyle? (lifestyle profiling)
2. At the time of this purchase, was there another product which you seriously considered buying instead of the item selected? (cognitive dissonance)
 - If yes 2a. Why did you not buy this item?
 - 2b. Do you occasionally wish you purchased the alternative item instead of the one selected? Explain. Exercise #3 - Decision-Making Processes
1. What circumstances led to your realization that you should buy the item purchased? (problem recognition)
2. Did you purchase the item at the first store visited? (search processes)
 - If no 2a. Why did you go to other stores?
 - 2b. Why did you buy at the particular where you made the purchase?

After each of these assignments are turned in they are graded based upon the completeness and thoroughness of the response to each question. The assignments, however, are not returned immediately. Rather, they are retained until the coverage of each major area has been completed. For example, at the end of those series of lectures and chapters pertaining to social/interpersonal influences, the papers are returned to students. At this point the real value of the exercise can be realized. Students are given assignment 1a, and are asked to write replies to the following two questions.

1. Using concepts and terminology introduced in this course, describe the actions and purchase behavior given in your responses to assignment one.
2. Given your responses to assignment one and the final purchase selection made by you, what actions by marketers do you believe could have enhanced the product purchase decision, the brand selected, and the store choice?

The purpose for asking these two questions is twofold: (1) to reinforce concepts/terms from the course by relating them to the students' own experiences, and (2) to make recommendations regarding marketing tactics and strategy based upon behavioral theory. Assignments 2a and 3a ask the identical questions administered in assignment 1a. The only difference being that assignments 2a and 3a are based upon the returned assignments two and three, respectively, and are assigned at the appropriate time during the course. Figure 3 provides flow diagram of how the six exercises would be administered throughout the semester in a typical consumer behavior course.

Figure 3
FLOW DIAGRAM OF CONSUMER BEHAVIOR EXERCISE ADMINISTRATION



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Assignments 1a through 3a are weighted substantially more in point value than one through three. It is through the later assignments that it is possible to determine the extent to which the new material has been understood in light of past experiences. Because these assignments do, however, capitalize upon real experiences from the students' past, the understanding and application of the theory and concepts is heightened.

Discussion

Because of the unique circumstances of the consumer behavior course, students enter it with an understanding not possible in other courses. By taking advantage of these acquired experiences as a consumer, it is possible to construct a series of assignments that facilitate a greater understanding of material introduced in the course. The foregoing demonstrates a means by which instructors of consumer behavior can construct learning assignments which tap student experiences, and then channel those experiences into additional learning. Although this learning exercise has been of value in the classroom, two areas are of need in the future. First, further refinement is needed of the question items in exercises 1 through 3. This is needed in order that they more comprehensively cover specific topics, as well as prove to be a valid means of addressing the respective topics. A second area of need is to experimentally administer the exercise. In other words, use of treatment and control sections, and then examination of student performance as it relates to the use (or nonuse) of the exercises. To this point the only feedback is that of student comment, which has been favorable. Stronger validation procedures are needed, and the administration of an experiment would be a step in that direction.