

Developments In Business Simulation & Experiential Learning, Volume 24, 1997
COMMUNICATING CONSUMER BEHAVIOR II: A MODIFIED EXERCISE USING
PERSONAL CONSUMPTION JOURNALS IN CONDENSED COURSES

Barbara-Jean Ross, Louisiana State University
Laura Williams, Tulane University

ABSTRACT

Consumer behavior is an integral part of the undergraduate marketing curriculum and hence instructors should be concerned with providing experiential exercises, which improve students' basic understanding of consumption behavior. The purpose of this paper is to propose a modification of Williams' (1995) consumption journal exercise for use in condensed class terms. Included in this proposed modification are a new advertising application and the utilization of the two-way fast feedback evaluation approach advocated by Bateman and Roberts (1995). Finally, the modified exercise is shown to satisfy the critical components of experiential learning and to be a valuable learning experience by students.

INTRODUCTION

During condensed courses (courses in which instruction time is compressed), instructors face the challenge of teaching a number of topics in longer class periods in a shorter span of time, while also retaining the interest of the students. At the same time, students' expectations of the workload and of the time required for class preparation decline. Student apathy for this situation is illustrated by their comments on a mid-summer evaluation. One student stated, "It's okay to let us go early sometimes. We have lots to do in the summer and keeping us for the full class sometimes deters us from coming." While another student added, "The only difficulty I had with the class is so much is crammed into such a short time period."

For a marketing core course, such as consumer behavior, this challenge is ever present since flexibility of subject matter is restrained. In consumer behavior, it is vital that upon completion of the course students have acquired a sound understanding of how consumers search for,

purchase, and use products and services. Furthermore, students should also be exposed to the social and psychological influences on these behaviors. Finally, to have garnered the most benefit, students should understand how to integrate the theoretical concepts into their real world experiences. To achieve these broad objectives, it is necessary that the instructor select a method, which will provide the students with the greatest benefit. Though many alternatives are available, a combination of traditional lecture format and experiential learning exercises is an effective approach. A key experiential exercise in consumer behavior is consumption journals, a method proven to be effective in communicating consumer behavior principles in a non-condensed course (Williams 1995).

The purpose of this paper is to describe a modified approach for the use of consumption journals in condensed course sessions. The modified approach still enables students to observe and record their own consumption habits and to explore the social and psychological factors which may be influencing their and others' purchase decisions. Furthermore, the greatest benefit is that they enjoy the learning process. As one student summed up the modified exercise, "I have found the project to be a great learning experience, as I have learned a lot about my consumption habits and it has been more fun than work for me."

THE MODIFIED CONSUMPTION
JOURNAL ASSIGNMENT

For use in condensed course sessions, the consumption journal exercise (Williams, 1995) was modified in two primary ways: the focus of the 10-product list was changed to include an advertising application and two-way fast feedback was insti-

tuted. Each of these primary modifications and the resulting changes to the administration of the exercise are discussed in the following sections.

Exercise Overview

This exercise was designed to be an incremental three-part assignment. The first part required students to maintain a personal consumption journal. Consumption journals consist of students recording descriptions of products and services that they purchase. The consumption journal expectations were similar to those outlined by Williams (1995), except that a two-way feedback evaluation system was introduced. In the second part each student was told to construct a portrait of themselves as a consumer by developing a list of ten products or services typically purchased. The third portion of the assignment was an advertisement evaluation, in place of the personal analysis papers advocated by Williams (1995). The advertisement evaluation required that students select two products from their ten-product list and locate advertisements or promotions for the two selections. For each advertisement selected, students were required to identify four to six consumer behavior concepts used in the ad, to describe the demographic and psychographic segments. Additionally, they needed to identify the target segments and whether they were representative of these segments. The administration procedures for the modified exercise, as well as the proposed grading scheme, are outlined in the following sections.

Introduction of the Assignment

The consumption journal was introduced on the first day of class, allowing students to begin immediately. This timing was challenging, as the students have no background knowledge of consumer behavior and, therefore, found it difficult to envision the application of consumer behavior concepts. Consequently, a sizable portion of class time was spent discussing the assignment. In addition detailed written instructions were provided, as well as sample journal entries.

Students were also advised that the objective of this three-part assignment was to enable them to integrate consumer behavior concepts as they relate to their own and others' consumption behaviors. The major emphasis was on their personal consumption behavior and on how what impacted them as consumers could be generalized to others.

Consumption Journal

Each student was responsible for maintaining a consumption journal which described the products and services which they purchased¹. Descriptions included what products and services were purchased, where the items were purchased, why the items were purchased, and what feelings were associated with the purchase. Due to the limited time in the condensed session, journals were turned in mid-week and returned the following day, thereby enabling the entries to be graded and returned to students before the weekend. In addition, students were required to complete a minimum of two entries each week. Artificially setting the number of entries assured that students would get sufficient feedback on each submission. Each week students were asked to submit the preceding weeks' entries with the new entries. Doing so allowed the instructor to view the weekly progress and made the students more aware of the patterns present in their consumption behavior.

To illustrate the type of detail expected in journal entries, an example journal entry was provided to the students with their course syllabus. In addition, students were provided with the grading policy associated with the consumption journal. One student journal entry are provided as examples in Figure 1. The length of time that students are required to maintain consumption journals is 4 submission (weeks). Four submissions should be the minimum as students only begin to understand

¹ The assignment was constrained to monetary exchanges (cash, check or credit), for reasons of simplicity, although the definition of consumption behavior includes other types of exchanges.

Developments In Business Simulation & Experiential Learning, Volume 24, 1997

and appreciate the concept in the fourth week. This realization on the part of the students was clearly delineated by the 17-day evaluations and the 25-day oral review of the assignment.

FIGURE 1 SAMPLE JOURNAL ENTRY

Date: June 8, 1996

Place of Purchase: Walgreens

Item Purchased: Lipsticks (7) tubes

Brand Name: DCA No 12 (Designer Classic Alternatives)

Price: 4.50 each x 7 = \$31.50

Reason for Purchase: I have been looking for this specific color for the past month. I saw the color and realized it was a remake of Estee Lauder but without the high price. So I actually got 7 tubes of lipstick for the price of two tubes from Estee Lauder

Feelings Associated with the Purchase: I feel great. I feel that I actually beat the system. After finding out that lipstick only costs about 15 cents to make, and consumers are really paying for the packaging and name have vowed never to pay \$14 or \$15 dollars again for a lipstick.

Two-Way Fast Feedback

To monitor the effectiveness of the exercise and to provide student feedback efficiently, the two-way fast feedback (Bateman & Roberts 1995) method was added to the consumption journal assignment. Two-way fast feedback refers to immediate evaluation and feedback by the students and the instructor. Bateman and Roberts conceptualized the feedback to be applied to teaching style, it can be applied also to the evaluation of class assignments. In this case it refers to the practice of returning students' work in a very short time interval and allowing for class discussion of the overall results. As a result, students are clearer on the instructors' expectations and students are able to evaluate the performance of the exercise. In this instance, students' journals were returned in the following class period (i.e., the next day) and discussion about the students' overall performance was conducted. At the same time, students were encouraged to voice any concerns or suggested improvements for the exercise. Student evaluations were taken in both oral and written forms throughout the exercise.

Consequently, two-way fast feedback allowed the assignment to be modified while in progress if

needed. One modification discovered via this method was the need for more examples and descriptive feedback since journal entries started immediately and the background knowledge of students varied greatly. Therefore, a fifteen-minute session was added to discuss and review entries from the past week and to highlight the additional changes needed for the next week. The evaluations of the class and project not only helped the students improve their journal entries, but also provided them with a stake in the assignment as they were helping to shape it. Instead of viewing the journals as busy work, they acquired an understanding of the value of the assignment in applying consumer behavior concepts.

Ten Product List

After the third submission of the consumer journal, students were instructed to review their consumption behavior and to create a list of ten products or services, which they own and/or regularly use. Students were asked to select only those products and services, which best portrayed their personality, values and lifestyle. Similar to the journal entry, the list was required to contain detailed information, such as brands, sizes, colors, and/or models, of the products and services. Figure 2 provides a sampling from a 10-product list.

FIGURE 2 SAMPLE 10 PRODUCT LIST

1) Eastpack backpack: navy blue canvas. I use this product every day to carry my books and other supplies. It says about me that I am a student who likes to be organized and prepared by keeping my belongings together.

2) Pantene Shampoo: for normal hair, wash my hair every morning with Pantene because it has a good reputation for keeping hair healthy. I buy it at Albertson's. As a young lady hygiene and cleanliness are important.

3) Blue Bell Ice Cream: homemade vanilla flavor buy a small carton once a week and eat some a few nights a week vanilla flavor choice says. I'm an old fashioned "plain Jane but the kid in me likes to enjoy simple good things like ice cream on a summer night.

5) Red dress: by "Studio" from Dillard's size 3. Although I've only worn it once, it is my favorite dress for special occasions. Its

simplicity says about me that I'm conservative and 'ladylike but the red color says that I'm classy and sassy too.

Overall, the requirements for developing the ten-item list followed those outlined by Williams (1995). The modification to the assignment was the application or use of the 10-product list. Unlike Williams' (1995) approach where the lists were redistributed to students to write an analysis paper the lists were returned to the creator for use in completing the third part of the assignment, the advertisement analysis. This modification was made due to the compressed nature of the course.

Advertisement Analysis

Once the 10-item product list was completed, each student was instructed to select two of the items on the list and to locate an advertisement for each of the selected products. The two advertisements then served as the medium for a short analysis paper. For the paper, the analysis of the each advertisement is broken down into three sections. First, students had to identify between four and six consumer behavior concepts used in the advertisements. Second, students were asked to identify and explain the demographic and psychographic segments to whom the ad was designed to appeal. Finally, students explained whether or not they fit into the identified target market.

Students were told that there was no correct answer for any advertisement. Instead, they were informed that the main objective of the analysis was to apply the concepts discussed during class. The criteria for the assignment were outlined on the syllabus and a detailed description was given during class preceding the assignment. An example of one student's advertisement analysis is detailed in Figure 3. The preference of the instructor will dictate style and length constraints for the paper. However, due to the structure of the summer session, a limitation of two singled spaced pages was appropriate.

Figure 3 Sample Advertisement Analysis (Condensed)

In the Nike advertisement, the main consumer behavior concept that is used is modeling. A model is someone whose behavior a person attempts to emulate. Certainly any woman would like to be a successful athlete like Jackie Joyner-Kersey. Although her picture in the ad is not the most prominent thing, an entire page is devoted to her. The text on the page says that 'she has a goal,' and a second consumer behavior principle is used here, attribution theory. In attribution theory, people attempt to determine whether the cause for action results from something internal or external. In this ad Nike is saying (or wanting us to believe) that the cause of Jackie Joyner-Kersey's success in athletics is that she wears Nike shoes. A third consumer behavior principle that is used in this ad is the image congruence hypothesis. Nike seems to be appealing to those who see themselves as very determined to succeed at very tough physical feats. Though not everyone wants to win the heptathlon the image of the shoe that this ad portrays seems to be directed at any woman who wishes to succeed at what she does even *if* it is not purely physical activity.

Grading

The entire three-part assignment was worth 150 points toward the students' final grade. The consumption journal was allocated a total point value of 100. Of this, 80 points were attributed to weekly progress checks for four weeks (i.e., 20 points per week). Students were not offered the option of making up missed weeks. Of the 20 weekly points, 10 points were allocated to each required entry. If more than two entries were done, the best two entries were considered when assigning a grade.

Written feedback was provided each week giving students insights into the strengths and weaknesses of their journal entries and direction for the next week's entries. Usually, part students had no trouble with the general descriptive information required. Two areas that consistently needed more detail were the reasons and feelings associated with the purchase. These deficiencies were resolved by encouraging the students to think about the psychological and social factors which could be influencing their purchasing behavior. The other 20 points for the consumption journal were allocated as a measure of the overall quality and improvement of the journal entries. This in-

Developments In Business Simulation & Experiential Learning, Volume 24, 1997

cluded an assessment of the degree to which students incorporated the weekly written comments into future entries.

The creation of the ten-product list was worth 10 points. This grade not only accounted for completion of the list, but also for the quality and descriptiveness of the list. Students received 7 points for completing the list and 3 points for the descriptiveness of the list.

Finally, 40 points are attributed to the advertisement assessment. Each ad was worth twenty points. Overall, the advertisement assessments were graded on the use of consumer behavior theory and principles. Point dispersion for the assignment was as follows. Each correctly identified consumer behavior concepts was worth 2.5 points. Identification of the demographic and psychographic target market was worth 5 points. The explication of why or why not the student fit into the target markets was also worth 5 points.

BENEFITS TO THE STUDENT

The consumption journals allowed the students to immediately begin to understand the relevance of studying consumer behavior. Additionally, it allowed them to apply their own experience to the material presented in class. In all three parts of the assignment, students use consumer behavior principles to demonstrate an understanding of segmentation, motivation, personality, psychographics learning, attitudes and reference group influence. Perhaps most importantly the journals moved the students from a passive to participatory state of learning. The modified exercise exemplifies an experiential learning exercise following the critical components outlined by Gentry (1990). Hence, a brief review of how the modified exercise meets the critical components of an experiential exercise is overviewed in Figure 4.

Figure 4

Components of Experiential Learning Used

- 1) Business curriculum-related:** Consumer Behavior is an integral part of undergraduate marketing curriculum.
- 2) Applied:** The assignment was clearly explained on the course syllabus and on further clarified on class handouts.
- 3) Participative:** This requires students to take an active role.

Students had to be active in recording journal entries, developing product lists and searching for and selecting advertisements.

4) **Interactive:** The journal entries required students to interact with their environment to develop journal entries, with the instructor via comments and with over students during the review of entries,

5) **Whole-person emphasis:** In order to complete the assignment students had to use cognitive, affective and behavioral aspects.

6) **Contact with the environment:** To obtain journal entries students had to make purchases and this entailed interaction with the real world.

7) **Variability:** This entails students recognizing the ambiguity inherent in real-work phenomena. The application of concepts taught in class in the real world is not as simple or clear as it appears in lecture, as the students discovered.

8) **Structured and monitored:** Students were given detailed instructions on journal entries. Additionally, the weekly due dates allowed the instructor to monitor closely the progress of students on the assignment.

9) **Feedback:** Students received process feedback in the written comments on the weekly journal entries. They also received outcome in the form of grades and comments. Additionally students via two-way fast feedback were allowed to continually evaluate the assignment and to provide an overall evaluation.

Two way fast feedback provides benefits to both the instructor and the students by supplying the instructor with constant feedback and by allowing students to become actively involved stakeholders in the class. In addition, journal discussion provided a break in the normal class routine, thereby maintaining students' attention for the duration of long class sessions. In addition, including highlights of the journal exercise in the class lecture increased the level of student interaction and class participation. For this reason, it also encouraged students to keep up with their course work.

Though two-way fast feedback was beneficial to both the instructor and the students in general, it had the potential to be biased towards students who participated more in class. To attempt to eliminate this potential bias 50 points of the students' final grade was allocated to class participation. In addition, a course evaluation was con-

ducted at mid-session to engender further student comments. To assure that students thought about the evaluation, a completed survey was counted as 10 of the 50-participation points². Similar to the weekly journal submissions, student responses were tabulated and discussed during class.

The results of this evaluation showed that most students felt that the consumption journal was a valuable learning experience. The comments of two students seemed to capture the broad spectrum of the class' perception of the assignment. One student stated, "I have found the project to be a great learning experience as I have learned a lot about my consumption habits and it has been more fun than work for me." While the other student stated, "Good technique to make us think of what we are learning. The class project (journal) and paper (10 product list) were a pain, but they did help me to realize what marketing is all about and how much goes into it."

Students also found personal benefits to the assignment. Several referred to the journal as a means of self-discovery. For instance, a student wrote, "I really liked the consumer journals we wrote because it made me analyze my own consumer behavior." Another said, "The diaries made me think a lot about what I was purchasing."

This evaluation also provided some unexpected information. As the intention of the ten-product list was modified, it was to be a minor part of the assignment, leading into the advertisement analysis. However, students really enjoyed this portion of the exercise. In fact, students discussed how the creation of the product list and associated consumer analysis were valuable experiences. One student wrote, "The paper involves us more in thinking and understanding how consumers actually do behave." Another felt that, "The 10 product list paper was a good way for us to see part of a marketers job." Yet even more surprising was that the majority of the students thought that the point value of the list should be increased from 10 to 30 points in conjunction with the point value of the journals decreasing from 100 to 80 points.

The advertisement analysis was also evaluated favorably by students. One student wrote, "By understanding what makes me want to buy a

certain product or products, I can understand what other people think." Overall, the entire three-part assignment was beneficial to students.

CONCLUSION

As stated in the introduction, this paper was designed to modify the application of long-term interactive project and make it viable for use in a condensed course. Condensed courses, such as summer terms, can become stale very quickly due to the extended daily meetings. Thus, a class exercise, which integrates class material with students' lives, increases their interest in learning the core concepts. This increase interest is highly desirable and the use of the modified exercise provides such an advantage.

Via the journal entries, the ten-product list and the advertisement analysis, students learned about their personal consumption habits this self-discovery was an exploration of the social and psychological factors that influenced their consumption behavior and how their behavior could be generalized to others. The proposed modifications were very effective in the shorter course term; however, one caveat warrants mention. The instructor must be prepared to devote a significant amount of time to administering and grading the assignments. Utilizing the two-way fast feedback requires immediate turn around time for grading, which can be hampered by the necessity for detailed feedback. Thus, although the instructor's investment in developing this exercise is considerable, students' return is well worth the effort!

REFERENCES

Available upon request

² The evaluations were anonymous. Students' names were recorded on a removable strip.