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THE USE OF EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISES IN THE UNDERGRADUATE CONSUMER BEHAVIOR COURSE

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ABSTRACT

While experiential exercises have been reported to be used in several marketing courses, their use in the consumer behavior course is not widely acknowledged. The authors believe that the unique aspects of this course cause it to be especially suited for experiential exercise pedagogy. The host of psychological, sociological, and marketing concepts involved are readily communicated by this approach. Examples are described, and the authors discuss important considerations in the use of experientials in the undergraduate consumer behavior course.

INTRODUCTION

Business simulation and experiential exercises have been used in a wide variety of instances with considerable success. Within the discipline of marketing, however, simulations and experientials have been reported to be successful primarily in the principles, marketing strategy, and marketing research courses for example. [1, 5, 9]. In addition, some applications in channels and retailing courses have been reported [6]. As is the case almost universally, use of simulations and experientials in these areas tends to emphasize the creation of new knowledge in students. For example, the principles level applications generally serve to introduce or demonstrate such basic marketing concepts as market segmentation or marketing mix synergy [4]; strategy and channels applications focus on the development of a framework for thinking about corporate marketing strategy [6]; and marketing research applications generally provide experiences which provide [or the learning of research tools such as sample design or data analysis [9]. In all of these concepts the student undergoes a first time exposure to the topic and its aspects.

From reports, the applications mentioned above have been gratifying for the most part. No further observations will be made by the authors, but a point already alluded to will be used as a springboard for suggestions on a new use of the experiential method in teaching marketing. The point is simple: all these applications concentrate on the creation of new knowledge. The authors would like to focus attention at this time on a course which they believe is particularly suited to the use of experiential exercises, but one which heretofore does not seem to have attracted the attention it appears to deserve in this regard. The course at issue is the course in consumer behavior. The unique aspect of this course with respect to experientials is that new knowledge is not its unique (nor necessarily even its primary) goal. Rather, the vast experience and observation pool brought to the course by students can be utilized and organized in such a way as to significantly augment the vocabulary and definitions burden normally assumed by this course. In other words, new knowledge is not the overriding objective, rather, it is the organization of students previous experiences and impressions into a useful and highly integrated body of knowledge which serves to guide the course. The

authors believe that this distinction makes the consumer behavior course uniquely well suited to the use of experientials.

Furthermore, it may be argued that many of the teaching aids and devices presently used by instructors of consumer behavior courses in a more or less ad hoc fashion are, in actuality, experiential exercises. Given this situation, organization and consolidation are certainly called for. At the very least, there is a great opportunity for serious dialogue on this fertile issue. For purposes of discussion, comments will be constrained to the undergraduate level course, although it is conceivable that many pertain to the graduate level course, as well.

THE TYPICAL CONSUMER BEHAVIOR COURSE

The consumer behavior course is often a required course in the undergraduate marketing curriculum. Its stated purpose is to provide an understanding of the behavior of consumers at both the individual and aggregate levels. This understanding is intended to provide a grounding for marketing management decisions. An additional benefit (sometimes an overt goal) of the consumer behavior course is that it is useful in effecting in students an understanding of their own behavior as consumers. Compared to other marketing courses this second aspect renders the consumer behavior course very unique indeed.

Regardless of the goal orientation adopted by the instructor, the subject matter with which he is charged is a staggering array of psychological, sociological, social-psychological, anthropological, economic, and marketing concepts and models. In short, the meat of the course is a composite of topics borrowed from the behavioral sciences which are thought to be helpful in the describing, understanding, or predicting of consumers' actions. As one can well expect, the myriad of topics necessitates a survey format with respect to presentation. Integration of the topics is sometimes attempted by the use of a consumer behavior model or basic conceptualization such as those offered by Engel, Blackwell and Kollatt [3], Markin [7], or other texts. The realized degree of integration of the topics, however, depends on the instructor. Regardless of whether or not an underlying framework is adopted, the diverse subject matter necessitates that extensive course time be devoted to definitions, examples, and background facts.

Within this wide array of subject matter, however, is contained a wealth of topics which are easily presented in an experientials format. In the interest of brevity, these introductory comments will concentrate on three major areas of coverage and itemize why experientials are particularly well suited to the areas in the authors' minds. These three areas are: psychological concepts, sociological concepts, and marketing (consumer behavior) concepts.

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Psychological Concepts

A considerable part of the course is devoted to a variety of consumer psychological concepts such as needs, motivation, learning, personality, self-image, and attitudes to name a few. The great majority of these concepts lend themselves to intuitive grasp once students have been actively involved in some sort of experiential devoted to them. Moreover, many of these psychological constructs are operational from the standpoint of experiential pedagogy in that simple scales or categorization methods have been devised, or can be devised with relatively little effort. Perhaps an even more significant attribute of these concepts is the fact that they are adaptable to relatively short, individualized experientials which can be reinforced by fairly simple summary explanations. The authors have come to realize that exposure to such exercises usually provides a residual benefit in that students come to understand their own psychological make-ups better, thus providing a relatively permanent frame of reference for these concepts, and other consumer behavior concepts.

Sociological Concepts

Another substantial chunk of the consumer behavior subject matter is composed of a host of sociological (including social psychological) concepts such as cultural influence, social groupings, reference group influence and family role structure. Experientials for these, while typically more complicated than psychological concept experientials with respect to design and administration, possess the same native characteristics. That is, they become more intuitively acceptable; they lend themselves to summary explanation; and they aid students in understanding their own social environments and behavior. Furthermore, it is fairly easy to construct exercises and/or reflective experientials which use crude scales or actual demonstrations of the concepts such as compliance to group norms or opinion leadership. In contrast to the psychological concept experientials, however, this set of concepts offers the user at least three alternative modes for use. Students can participate in group exercise; students can observe group behavior; or students can reflect on their own history of group participation, interaction, and influence. Examples which come to mind readily are: role playing, group decision making, influence of reference groups, and the use of opinion leaders.

Marketing Concepts

A third set of concepts which can be treated with experiential exercises are consumer behavior concepts which have emerged from the marketing literature. Examples of this set of topics include brand loyalty, price sensitivity, evoked set concepts, and market segmentation. Once again, in the authors' opinions, these concepts are readily adaptable to the use of simple exercises. In fact, many of the exercises used by the authors are obtained directly from descriptions of research methodology and findings. Alternative presentation modes with regard to the marketing topics treated in the consumer behavior course include personal experiences which are primarily internal or psychological in nature, reflections on participation in consumer behavior, the use of secondary data on consumers to formulate marketing decisions, and analysis of promotional material for marketing content. An additional use which can be incorporated here is some sort of programmed review of economic and marketing terminology positioned early in the consumer behavior course. In addition, simplified model construction comes to mind as a viable use of the technique.

WHY THE EXPERIENTIAL METHODS FITS

Before continuing on to offer some examples of experientials used by the authors, it seems appropriate to devote some attention to precisely why the method fits the course. All students are consumers and have psyches and social interactions which are and can be directly related to consumer behavior concepts. This universal background encompasses actual buying process and consumption experiences. In short, each student has within himself a great wealth of experiences. In short, each student has within himself a great wealth of experiences which are ripe for organization into a meaningful framework. This circumstance makes the consumer behavior course qualitatively different from any other marketing course. In other courses, knowledge must be created, not organized.

All instructors who must teach survey type courses face a problem similar to that confronted by the consumer behavior educator. Coverage of the consumer behavior subject mass has historically necessitated an eclectic, lecture-oriented, definition-ridden presentation which often quickly leads to student boredom. Fortunately, the combination of the advances made by use of experientials and recent discoveries made by consumer researchers has opened doors to multimodel learning opportunities. Cases in point are topics such as psycho-graphics, evaluative criteria, attitude models, image congruence, the use of information sources, and consumer complaining behavior, all of which can fit the experiential method. Other presentation methods are in practice, of course, but the instructor who does not acknowledge the value of experientials here certainly underestimates his ability to be effective. Moreover, he probably is using quasiexperientials unknowingly.

From a more practical standpoint, the authors have found through their use of this method (just as others have found in their use of experientials) that participatory learning leads to increased attention, retention and understanding of the concepts involved. Even more important, it has been our experience that concepts and models which are sometimes difficult to comprehend because of the complexity or tedium of verbal description are often easy for students to experience and then to diagnose through subsequent reflection, guided by the instructor in a class context. Finally, the authors have found that the use of experientials encourages individual student growth through the development of individual points of view. Students may come to voice strong agreement (or disagreement) with the concepts involved. In either event, once vocalization is achieved, a forum for class discussion and interaction has been established. Needless to say, this type of situation is not always easily engendered at the undergraduate level, particularly not in survey courses.

THREE EXAMPLES OF EXPERIENTIALS IN CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

It is not the purpose of this section of the paper to describe in great detail the experiential exercises used by the authors. Rather, its intent is to offer the flavor of various applications of the method to consumer behavior subject matter. These three examples, then, are skeleton descriptions from each of the three consumer behavior concept areas discussed previously.

Example 1: Consumer Personalities

This experiential is concerned with the use of personality theory to explain consumer behavior. Students are provided a self-report instrument for personality test devised and reported by Cohen [2]. The questionnaire

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is a disguised test which identifies each person's dominant trait as either compliant, aggressive, or detached. Students are then shown how to score their own personality profile and informed of the results reported by Cohen with his sample of undergraduate students. The session concludes with a discussion of the value and problems associated with the use of personality variables to describe or predict consumer behavior.

Example 2: Culture and Subculture

In this experiential students are provided with a list of concept definitions which refer to cultural specification and underlying behavioral rules. Students are then led through exercises in which they are first required to express cultural behavioral norms and to provide examples of situations where the possession or use of artifacts is expressive of cultural awareness and then shown how selection even of services is culturally expressive. Finally, students prepare a list of basic American possessions which constitute a "physical norm", and look at subcultural exceptions to this norm.

Example 3: Evoked Sets

This exercise provides a graphic personal example of internal search for brand information. Students are asked to assume they are 'out of' a certain convenience product such as mouthwash or toothpaste. They are instructed to write down all the brands they can recall. Then they are requested to identify from that list brands that: (1) they would most probably purchase; (2) they would most probably not purchase; and (3) they know but have not acquired positive or negative feelings toward as yet. The resultant groups are excellent examples of the evoked, inept, and inert brand sets described and researched by Narayana and Markin [8]. Class discussion turns to possible reasons why the three sets exist, individual differences, and marketing implications of the sets.

CONSIDERATIONS IN THE USE OF EXPERIENTIALS IN THE CONSUMER BEHAVIOR COURSE

The authors wish to share some of their thoughts and concerns on the use of experientials in the undergraduate consumer behavior course as conclusion to this paper. Certainly there are others who are already using the approach or are considering the use of the experiential approach in this course, and this paper is primarily intended to be a vehicle for comparing experiences and opinions. To this end, there are four areas of concern which the authors would like to address: (1) when experientials should be used; (2) how much should they be used; (3) core versus peripheral experientials; and (4) the development of an integrative understanding of consumer behavior through the use of experientials.

Before these issues are addressed, however, there is one issue of broader interest - that of validity. Fundamentally, experientials are not intended here to be a source of research data. Rather, reinforcement of learning is their primary function. In this light, it is of relatively little importance whether some scale meets various validity criteria. What is of importance is the efficacy of the experiential as a learning vehicle. As long as student mastery of the concept is achieved in conjunction with parsimonious use of classroom time, the technique is valid for its purpose. For those who desire combined teaching with the collection of research data, there are previously validated instruments available in many of the areas.

Precisely how much use of experientials is optimal is subject to hot debate. However, the question seems especially appropriate in this case where there are so many opportunities to employ experiential exercises. The issues with respect to the 'how much' question seem fairly well defined. On one hand is the issue of experiential fatigue brought about by experientials which are too long, while on the other hand is the issue of experiential saturation brought about by the use of too many experientials. Complicating these questions is the breadth of course coverage versus the depth of topic coverage question. Again, there is need for the development of guidelines and the application of empirical research in this area.

With the great variety of information which can be placed under the consumer behavior heading, there exists the question of what constitutes a core of consumer behavior topics and what topics are peripheral. Identification of the core could lead to the use of a highly integrated approach, perhaps in the form of a comprehensive consumer behavior model and experientials designed to produce the model piece-by-piece. Similarly, specification of peripheral topics affords the flexibility of varying presentation modes, adopting a tangential orientation to these topics, and possibly situating them as optional experientials. In the absence of a universally accepted core of consumer behavior concepts, each instructor necessarily must devise his own set (if he wishes to have one) and to address the presentation mode issue alone. It would seem that a group dialogue needs to be established here.

An issue related to the above is the issue of multiple presentation of any given concept. For instance, the instructor may present an experiential which is highly integrated into his 'core' of experientials, and then augment that experiential with another one (quasi- peripheral?) straight out of psychological or sociological literature in the form of standard scale. This type of option does exist, although its viability is in some question.

Finally, and perhaps the most important issue of all, remains the question of the extent to which the instructor desires to develop an integrative understanding of consumer behavior in his students. Admittedly, this course serves multiple purposes, and it is at the discretion of the instructor, within the guidelines of his departments curriculum philosophy, to pursue marketing management education, consumer education, or some intermediate blend. Experientials can be used, no matter what the final determination, however, qualitative differences will necessarily be evident. With the marketing management education intent, there is the requirement of connecting consumer behavior information to render effective marketing decisions such as product design, price levels, advertising appeals, or distribution network decisions. With the consumer education goal, no such connections are necessary. Instead, the consumer is taught to make better consumption decisions and the connection turns to a generalization about what the consumer will do in the market place to be more effective. The authors wish to note that regardless of the orientation taken, there is a great deal of potential overlap.

In conclusion, consumer behavior courses offer a practically limitless set of opportunities for the use of experientials pertaining to already internalized but unorganized information. The myriad of concepts, their interrelations and, the abundant source of students past experiences and observations make for an exciting matrix of learning experience. Conspicuously absent, however, are guidelines or even a dialogue on the several issues accompanying the use of experientials in this course.

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