

# A Commentary on “Business Marketing in Master’s Programs: A Part of the Fabric”

Earl D. Honeycutt, Jr.

**ABSTRACT.** The purpose of this commentary is to examine the authors’ recommendations, raise questions and concerns, and extend the authors’ experiences by suggesting ways graduate B2B educators at both large and small programs can benefit from the authors’ recommendations and their considerable expertise in teaching business marketing. doi:10.1300/J033v14n01\_05 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2007 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

**KEYWORDS.** Business marketing, business-marketing courses, MBA program, business-marketing education

## *INTRODUCTION*

In a *Journal of Business-to-Business Marketing* article, Narus and Anderson (1998) challenged graduate business faculty to consider three opportunities:

1. Promoting Growth in Business Marketing Education.
2. Reducing the Shortage of Master’s Level Teaching Materials.
3. Building a Business Marketing Educators’ Network.

---

Earl D. Honeycutt, Jr. is affiliated with the Department of Business Administration, Elon University, NC 27244.

Journal of Business-to-Business Marketing, Vol. 14(1) 2007

Available online at <http://jbbm.haworthpress.com>

© 2007 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.

doi:10.1300/J033v14n01\_05

In response to this challenge, the authors offer a “straw man,” that describes and explains how business-to-business (B2B) marketing was woven into the fabric of an MBA program at a Canadian university. Perhaps as a consequence of commenting on the original paper (Honeycutt 1998), I have been asked to consider the current manuscript. Therefore, the purpose of this commentary is to examine the authors’ recommendations, raise questions and concerns, and suggest ways graduate B2B educators at both large and small institutions can benefit from the authors’ considerable expertise in teaching business-to-business marketing.

### ***BUSINESS MARKETING AS PART OF THE FABRIC***

In their article, the authors state that it is necessary to position business marketing differently and offer their experiences at a Canadian university as an example. First, the authors propose that business marketing should be introduced early in the program so that students can “assess new situations and environments.” That is, all MBA students are taught to incorporate key B2B concepts into their decision-making via subject content and teaching methods in the introductory MBA marketing class. Also, an extensive array of B2B-related elective courses is available for graduate students to broaden their perspective. Lastly, numerous faculty members with business marketing expertise offer a support network and learning opportunities in B2B areas.

Justification for increased business marketing emphasis in the graduate program is based upon three factors: First, because of large sales figures, B2B accounts for the majority of commercial activity in the developed world. Second, student unfamiliarity with B2B marketing requires attention to correct this misperception. Finally, that most MBA students at the authors’ school will spend a career working in a business marketing environment is quite high. The authors also state that at their business college: (1) publishing cases is expected and rewarded and (2) classes center on making general management decisions that transcend a single academic area.

In summary, reading the authors’ manuscript was enjoyable and I agree with nearly all recommendations in this fine article. However, in an effort to play “devil’s advocate,” six questions are proposed.

#### ***Why Is B2B Short Changed in MBA Programs?***

Business marketing receives short shrift in many MBA programs because of a shortage of Ph.D. faculty who have B2B expertise and com-

petition from other academic areas within the school/college of business. First, the majority of marketing faculty members conduct micro- and consumer behavior-focused research. Why does this trend continue? Because it is rational and faster to design and complete a small, micro-oriented study that determines whether consumers are more influenced by a product's color, price, or features. Contrast this to a B2B dissertation that necessitates a Ph.D. candidate to find an industry sponsor that will cooperate with the study, and that requires the candidates to invest hundreds of hours familiarizing themselves with the industry. To complete a B2B thesis or dissertation is not something that can be completed in six months to one year!

In most business schools/colleges, competition among academic disciplines for resources is intense. In my 25 years of academic experience at three U.S. universities, competition for resources and control of the curriculum are hopelessly intertwined. That is, if one academic area can get their courses embedded in a graduate program this results in larger budget allocations and increased faculty lines. I sincerely believe that many faculty members, both within and outside of marketing, are either more concerned about their own self-interests or lulled into complacency by inertia than in initiating change for the general benefit of our students and firms that hire our product.

### ***How Does One Coordinate the Design and Delivery of Team-Taught Sessions?***

It is easy to propose that teams should teach business-oriented courses, but to make this a reality raises several issues. First, who is the professor of record? How is one credited with teaching a team-taught class? About many schools, particularly public universities, the public has raised concerns that faculty members are not teaching enough students/hours and administrators may be reluctant to allocate release time for team teaching. If a faculty member teaches two team-taught classes per semester (or school year) does this equate to a single preparation using a workload method?

Second, how do faculty members coordinate pedagogical responsibility that results in a balanced presentation for a case or topical area? Most U.S. faculty members are trained narrowly in a single area, for example, marketing, management, economics, finance—and may feel less confident explaining marketing's interaction with finance. Team-taught classes, if properly planned and coordinated, will improve student understanding of business concepts and ideas; but how do we train faculty

to become competent in related business disciplines? Another way to ask the question: How do we hire and train more generalist educators when most business professors view themselves as specialists?

***Where Does One Find Faculty with Broad B2B Marketing Knowledge and Interests?***

A major concern faced by business schools when making business marketing a part of their fabric is: Where can a school find business-marketing faculty with expertise to teach and research in B2B areas? Several U.S. schools—Penn State, Northwestern, and Michigan State—have outstanding B2B faculty members; but in general, many AACSB accredited schools have only one business marketer on faculty. In a number of business schools/colleges, there are no business marketers on staff!

A number of outstanding B2B marketing faculty members have been hired at the authors' university and their status has been enhanced by local corporations endowing chaired positions. However, this is not the case at most universities. Business schools around the globe are specializing in: Service, strategy, sales, supply chain, and B2B, to name just a few marketing areas. Therefore, business schools hire their faculty based upon their strategic focus.

***Can Business Marketing Be Emphasized Without Offering Multiple B2B Classes?***

The authors provide examples of extensive B2B-related courses offered by their institution; but, what about the curriculum at most colleges/universities? A number of business schools/colleges offer only a single industrial or B2B marketing course. And at many business schools today it would be difficult to add additional courses in supply-chain management, sales management, customer relationship management, and strategic market planning. This is because educational institutions face major human- and financial-resource shortages. Also, if B2B-related courses are offered as electives, can the school justify smaller class sizes and would competent faculty be available to teach such specialized classes?

***How Can Schools That Are Not Two-Years in Length Add a B2B Focus?***

There are multiple forms of master's degree programs around the world. At the authors' university, the MBA is a two-year program. However, at other AACSB accredited programs, there are variations in length

of time and residence. Institutions also offer part-time, one-year, and Executive MBA programs that differ in their focus and requirements. How can all schools integrate business marketing as a fabric of their program?

***How Successful Has the Transition to Business Marketing Been?***

Finally, it would be interesting and insightful to learn how successful the B2B marketing focus has been at the authors' university. What has been the response of students, faculty in other disciplines, and companies that hire the authors' graduate students? What metrics are utilized to monitor customer (hiring firm) satisfaction? How have faculty hiring, retention, and institutional resource issues been affected at the authors' university? Since moving to a business marketing focus is a change in the business college's marketing strategy, such a decision affects multiple processes in institutional management and it would be very insightful for the authors to share their knowledge with the readers of the *Journal of Business-to-Business Marketing*.

***APPLYING THIS KNOWLEDGE***

The authors propose a number of excellent ideas and principles that are utilized at their business college to improve the fabric of B2B education in the MBA program. To segue into my recommendations for improving B2B education at other educational institutions, I have transposed the authors' goal to read: "The following points allow us to generalize [their] specifics to [our] situations." This goal is accomplished by examining four principles that are repeatedly reinforced throughout the authors' manuscript: Integration, flexibility, pillars of knowledge, and decision tools.

***INTEGRATION***

In MBA programs, of varying shapes or sizes, B2B focus and fabric must be thoroughly integrated. This can be accomplished in several ways. First, graduate students need to be informed of the importance of B2B markets, using numbers and facts like those documented in the "fabric" article. By informing students of the level of economic activity in industrialized nations, of large purchases at corporations like General Motors, Wal-Mart, and Procter & Gamble, and the emergence and growth of B2B

e-Commerce, students will more fully understand and appreciate the importance of B2B activity. Many professors currently provide such information in their MBA marketing management class, but insuring that the majority of students are exposed to this information would be an initial step toward integrating B2B in smaller, less-concentrated MBA programs.

Second, MBA students must clearly understand how B2B marketing is connected to related business disciplines and the future. As proposed by the authors, our graduate students utilize B2B knowledge in investment banking, information systems, and strategy consulting. These academic areas could be the initial contacts marketing educators make with colleagues to further integrate B2B knowledge concepts into non-fabric MBA programs. Likewise, bringing added focus and energy into supply chain management, networking, and technology discussions will energize our students and demonstrate the importance of B2B relationships in the future.

### ***FLEXIBILITY***

To quote the authors: "Depending on the situation in any given case, certain areas of the framework can be emphasized over others." This can be accomplished by insuring that pedagogically we utilize "cases, discussions, lectures, and decision frameworks that cross both consumer and business situations." To me, this suggests that we need to move beyond planning to teach, so that we think differently about how to teach the initial MBA marketing course. One way of accomplishing this is to ask ourselves a question about each topic we present: How does this impact "markets and consumers," and the "market chain and customers?" Such perspectives help "students see that marketing is about both business customers and their consumers." For marketing faculty members who teach the initial MBA course, this may be a significant and essential shift in how graduate students are formally introduced to the marketing discipline.

### ***PILLARS OF KNOWLEDGE***

It is imperative that we provide our graduate students with a thorough grounding in the four "pillars" of knowledge the authors recommend: "organizational buying behavior, relationship management, value, and business networks" (c.f., Bunn, Butaney, and Hoffman 2001; Tanner 1999). In regard to buying behavior, groups of MBA students can utilize

both consumer and B2B purchase models either in or out of class and then contrast their differing buying process. Such an exercise would provide insight about the complexity, long-term nature of the process, membership in buying centers, need to reduce risk, and importance of forming relationships that permeate B2B purchasing in contrast to consumer buying (Dwyer and Tanner 2006).

Although relationship marketing is common theme in most MBA texts, the focus appears to be more heavily focused upon consumer relationships. Placing added emphasis on relationships between organizations over time in cases and examples will move B2B further into the fabric of MBA courses and by extension, MBA programs. The most recent text by Dwyer and Tanner (2006) provide excellent examples of relationship development, relationships, and relationship management.

The third pillar, value, is a key marketing concept that needs to be repositioned. Said differently, rather than using consumer examples to show how firms create value for their customers, we should compare how firms create value for both B2B partners and their end consumers. As stated by the authors: Recent research “confirms the centrality of value to the understanding of business marketing” (c.f., Lapierre 2000; Payne 2001).

Finally, networks influence buyer-seller relationships downstream, supplier relationships upstream, other relationships, and a company’s alliances. Networks are a strategic exercise and are important for analyzing future situations in all graduate classes completed by our students. Thus, greater emphasis should be placed upon network relationships, strategies, outcomes, and conflicts as they apply both within and outside the organization—customers, suppliers, regulators, and competitors (c.f., Hertz 1998; Ghoshal and Bartlett 1990).

## ***TOOLS***

The authors also provide an excellent analytical tool in Figure 1: “Framework for Marketing Decisions.” Such a figure is not new to the world, but it does offer students a framework for understanding the necessary steps to make marketing decisions in either consumer or B2B markets. No matter what type of MBA program is offered, this tool can be introduced in the initial marketing management class and then reinforced in marketing electives. This framework and the relationships that are evident allow MBA students to understand B2B opportunities and visualize how business decisions are related.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

The authors have expanded our knowledge and understanding of B2B marketing education by offering a case study of how their university repositioned the focus of their MBA program to B2B marketing. Their article offers guidance for faculty, chairs, and administrators who want to make changes in master's programs. The purpose of my commentary is to raise questions that were not evident in the original paper. Master's level programs differ around the world, as they should, to address distinct institutional goals, strategies, and markets. However, the authors offer outstanding guidelines for institutions that want to adopt a business-market focus. My response proposes ways that smaller, part-time, and executive MBA programs can integrate B2B marketing into the fabric of their program. I appreciate the authors sharing their B2B pedagogical knowledge and look forward to reading their responses to the questions, comments, and suggestions proposed in this commentary.

### REFERENCES

- Bunn, Michele D., Gul T. Butaney, and Nicole P. Hoffman (2001), "An Empirical Model of Professional Buyers' Search Effort," *Journal of Business-to-Business Marketing*, 8:4, 55-83.
- Dwyer, F. Robert and John F. Tanner (2006), *Business Marketing*, Boston: McGraw-Hill Irwin.
- Ghoshal, Sumantra and Christopher A. Bartlett (1990), "The Multinational Corporation as an Interorganizational Network," *Academy of Management Review*, 15:4 (October), 626-645.
- Hertz, Susanne (1998), "Domino Effects in International Networks," *Journal of Business-to-Business Marketing*, 5:3, 3-32.
- Honeycutt, Earl D., Jr. (1998), "Commentary on 'Master's Education in Business Marketing: Quo Vadis,'" *Journal of Business-to-Business Marketing*, 5:1/2, 95-98.
- Lapierre, Jozee (2000), "Customer-Perceived Value in Industrial Contexts," *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 15, 122-140.
- Narus, James A. and James C. Anderson (1998), "Master's Education in Business Marketing: Quo Vadis," *Journal of Business-to-Business Marketing*, 5:1/2, 75-94.
- Payne, Adrian (2001), "Diagnosing Customer Value: Integrating the Value Process and Relationship Marketing," *British Journal of Management*, 12:2, 159-183.
- Tanner, John F., Jr. (1999), "Organizational Buying Theories: A Bridge to Relationships Theory," *Industrial Marketing Management*, 28 (May), 245-256.

doi:10.1300/J033v14n01\_05