

Commentary on “Business-to-Business Marketing Textbooks: A Comparative Review”

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ABSTRACT. In “Business-to-Business Marketing Textbooks: A Comparative Review,” the authors provide a detailed analysis of 16 English language and 23 other than English Business-to-business textbooks by looking at the approach, readability level, number of illustrations, etc. Our response raises questions and issues distinct from the authors in an effort to further the understanding of what constitutes a quality textbook. Issues related to methodology, cross-cultural comparisons, and additional areas of importance are explored. Recommendations for conducting a more meaningful analysis are provided. doi:10.1300/J033v14n04_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.]

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INTRODUCTION

The authors of “Business-to-Business Marketing Textbooks: A Comparative Review” (Backhaus, Mell, and Sabel (2007), are to be

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commended for reviewing a comprehensive list of worldwide business-to-business (B2B) textbooks. There is little doubt that a tremendous amount of time and effort were devoted identifying, analyzing, and categorizing the myriad published B2B books that are available to instructors at the collegiate level. That stated, the comparative review raises a number of important questions about the methodology performed, the findings, and the recommendations offered by the authors. The purpose of this response is to offer a distinct perspective from the authors that broadens the contribution of this research and offers additional insight to the readership of the *Journal of Business-to-Business Marketing*.

METHODOLOGY

First, any methodology that proposes a schema or model to organize and simplify what exists in the real world is open to question. As seen in their article, the authors offer eight categorical approaches to organize 16 English and 23 other than English (OTE) B2B textbooks. This means that the authors believe it is necessary to create eight categories for sixteen reviewed English language books or an average of two textbooks per approach (16/8). It should be noted that in some cases categories, for example, Network Approach, Value Approach, and Business Type approach, consisted of only one book. Also, when looking at the definition of the managerial versus the extended managerial or modified managerial approaches additional questions are raised about the distinctiveness of each approach. In summary, we ask: how does the proposed organizational structure add to our understanding of and ability to rate the current B2B textbook marketplace?

We believe that it would be also informative for the authors to analyze the content of textbooks. For example, what are the most important or most commonly found concepts that are essential for a student completing a B2B class to know? The suggested approach is more difficult to operationalize and raises the question of subjectivity—who decides what is important? Should industry representatives have an opportunity to assess books? However, for an instructor or an author of a B2B marketing textbook, it is more important to know what is presented in the textbook, rather than whether the text is managerial or modified managerial in its approach! There are at least four key questions for those selecting a textbook that include:

1. Is the subject content correct, accurate, and up-to-date?
2. Do the topical areas support the course objectives?

3. Can the subject areas be integrated into the broader areas of marketing and business?
4. How is the content presented?

Third, the authors are commended for their efforts to find, acquire, translate, and analyze B2B textbooks in languages that are other than English. As listed, most of the OTE books are written and published in the European Union, with a few other examples originating in China and South America. However, as researchers who have devoted a tremendous amount of time conducting cross-cultural studies, we are concerned about the potential bias that is evident in the description of how the OTE books were evaluated. That is, there did not appear to be an organized research effort that standardized how, what, and by whom the books were translated, analyzed, and evaluated. Without being trained in cross-cultural research techniques, B2B, *and* the home country culture, there is significant potential for misunderstanding the technical language, nuances, and practical examples. Even within the English textbooks, cultural and language differences influence the disparate terms that appear in the textbooks. It is also difficult to compare OTE textbooks because they are generally written for a more specific market than are English textbooks. In addition, the subject matter of the book may be affected by the stage of economic development in the country.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

The authors cited the fact that B2B textbooks have risen in price over the past two decades. It might be helpful to compare the increases in book prices against other variables—automobiles, houses, or wages? Textbook prices have increased over the years and it would be interesting to see this compared to inflation by country. Is the price increase a function of what the market will bear or have expectations by faculty for additional support materials affected price levels? For example, 25 years ago most textbooks came with an instructor's manual that provided a basic outline of each book chapter that allowed the professor to add notes and speak from the outline. In addition there were acetate transparencies, limited guidance on cases, a few supplemental articles that could be used to broaden one's lecture and an optional workbook for students to purchase. One has only to look at today's texts that offer computer exercises and games, links to websites, test banks, cases that have purchased from leading universities, multi-colored pages, and interactive classroom scenarios. As in most markets, attempts to differentiate and create

competitive advantage are evident in the textbook publishing industry and these efforts have driven up prices paid by consumers.

That said, two other comments on textbook prices are relevant. First, most U.S. textbook authors receive the majority of commissions on the first year sales of the book. This is because campus bookstores and students search for the least costly book from used book sellers, offshore vendors, or on Ebay®. Book resellers have also impacted the initial cost of a textbook charged by publishers because of the need to cover initial and overhead publishing costs. However, it is always interesting during our first class session when we observe books students have purchased from overseas booksellers that are overseas editions of U.S. texts that can be purchased for 20-30% of what our university bookstores charge for the same edition!

Also, even though we do not have empirical evidence to support this statement, it is our belief that most B2B cases are out of date! The authors did not discuss this area, but an important component of a textbook is the quality and relevance of the cases included in that book. In most U.S. texts, cases tend to be shorter and more focused on marketing. Conversely, in some European and Indian universities, cases are more comprehensive, include financial data, and are based upon local research conducted by faculty members at that university. Given this marketplace for B2B case studies, we wonder how that 16 U.S. and 23 OTE textbooks can acquire and keep their cases current and unique?

Although the authors did not consider the backgrounds of the individual textbook writers, it appears certain that their locale, business experience, academic training, and research interests impacted the content of their book. For example, in the U.S. market many academics that teach, research, and write textbooks have worked in B2B marketing. Many were salespersons, managers, or market researchers who went on to earn Ph.D. degrees in business administration. Conversely, in Europe, China, or other geographical areas, the author may have been academically trained in Economics or Engineering. This is not meant to suggest that one type of training is superior, but to merely explain why there are distinct B2B terms in each textbook and why different areas are present or absent in book chapters. Also, in the United States selling to B2B partners is considered to be a major part of industrial or macro marketing. In Europe, the idea of teaching selling may still be tainted by a belief that selling is a "trade." Lastly, large manufacturing nations/cultures will focus on different B2B structures than service economies. For example, the U.S., German, and Chinese economies may include more manufacturers and industries in contrast to Sweden or South America

where partnering and international knowledge are more relevant for the students who take the course.

The authors were also unable to determine the number of textbooks sold globally and we wonder whether an accurate sales figure is available. That is, does anyone really know how many B2B books are sold? Certainly there are estimates. Based upon the fact that at least 39 textbooks are available worldwide, we doubt that the market can profitably support such a large number of B2B textbooks. Perhaps the most popular B2B textbooks provide the author(s) with a reasonable return for their research and writing efforts, but our deduction is that most authors write textbooks for reasons other than economic benefit.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Conducting a review of textbooks is a complex and lengthy endeavor. Backhaus, Mell, and Sabel (2007) offer an initial analysis of current B2B textbook approach, readability, illustrations and footnotes, practical examples, etc. Most of these areas are categorical in nature. That is, the authors have categorized what is found in existing B2B textbooks that are available in English and in other languages. This massive effort has made a contribution to the B2B marketing knowledge base.

However, what this research effort also demonstrates is that analyzing a group of textbooks is an extremely complex endeavor that is influenced by methodological, cultural, and environmental factors. Our contribution to this process is to offer distinct views and explanations not proposed by the authors. The bottom line is that when a B2B marketing instructor wants to select a textbook for his or her class, they approach the marketplace with differing needs that are based upon the goals of the respective course. The original article by the authors offers an initial point for better understanding existing B2B marketing textbooks, but additional research is needed to provide instructors with the information they can utilize to select or write their own textbook.

REFERENCE

Backhaus, Klaus, Bastian Mell, and Tatjana Sabel (2007), "Business-to-Business Marketing Textbooks: A Comparative Review," *Journal of Business-to-Business Marketing*, Vol.14, No 4, pp. 11-65.

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