

Commentary on:
“Master’s Level Education
in Business Marketing: Quo Vadis?,”
by James A. Narus
and James C. Anderson

Earl D. Honeycutt, Jr.

INTRODUCTION

In their article, “Master’s Level Education in Business Marketing: Quo Vadis?,” the authors investigate an important academic area for those who teach in the business-to-business marketing area. In fact, this study makes a substantial contribution since little appears to have been written about the topic. It appears that, in addition to gathering basic factual data, the authors are seeking answers to two fundamental questions: (1) given the perceived level of importance of business marketing, why isn’t the course offered in more graduate business programs? and (2) what tangible actions can be taken to raise the level of importance and value delivered by instructors of business marketing?

The purposes of this commentary are to expand upon related issues implied by that article’s findings and to provide suggestions to assist future researchers. The overall goal of these remarks is to broaden the business marketing education debate.

DISCUSSION

There is little argument that increasing numbers of students are completing their master’s degree. This is true in the U.S. and, even

Earl D. Honeycutt, Jr., is Professor of Marketing, College of Business and Public Administration, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA.

Journal of Business-to-Business Marketing, Vol. 5(1/2) 1998
© 1998 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.

more so, in Europe and Asia. Several universities—such as Oklahoma City College and the University of Maryland—rotate U.S. professors to international locations to teach M.B.A. classes. Other schools, like Northeastern, use technology to broadcast classes to clusters in Australia and Asia. As the authors state: there is considerable variation between U.S. and overseas graduate programs and a number are striving to increase their reputation.

Business marketing classes are seldom mainstream in M.B.A. programs. Graduate students who concentrate in marketing normally complete such standard courses as marketing management, strategy, new product development, and marketing research. Only when qualified faculty are available are business marketing classes offered and this may be as an infrequent elective. Likewise, as seen in this sample, class sizes vary tremendously. It would be informative to learn the mean and median class sizes in this study, as well as whether these classes are required or elective in nature.

There remains debate about whether there should be a single textbook for graduate business marketing. For one thing, competition is healthy; and secondly, few areas of marketing rely upon a single textbook. Because 17 survey respondents (45%) report they do not use a textbook, this may imply that a coursepack of cases and articles to support lectures and exercises are utilized. The instructors also provide a list of standard topics covered in class, such as: buyer behavior, pricing, segmentation, channels, marketing strategy, etc. It is also apparent, from the responses, that current topics such as reengineering and cross-functional teams are interspersed within the course. However, current topics, such as these, go out of style quickly and too often come to be viewed as fads by practitioners.

Certainly, a textbook with support materials permits less experienced instructors to teach business marketing. But is it advantageous to have a professor with little or no practical business marketing knowledge teaching a class based upon packaged teaching materials? In my opinion, an experienced professor brings significantly more to the classroom. Also, if constrained by budget and class size, faculty may have to choose between business marketing and more mainstream consumer behavior, strategy, and research classes. It is almost certain in this situation that business marketing will receive less support from faculty whose focus is consumer marketing.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This research provides the reader with some basic information about the status of business marketing classes. However, subsequent studies should consider the following suggestions for improving their methodology. First, the sample should be sufficiently large and representative of U.S. and/or European business schools. To obtain respondent compliance, it will be necessary to reach the small number of faculty who teach business marketing courses. Perhaps one way of solving this dilemma would be to use a mailing list from the AMA Sales and/or B2B Interest Groups. Second, once a more substantive sample is obtained, it would be more meaningful to investigate this complex problem by separating and analyzing graduate programs. Third, demographic data, such as university position, age, and industry experience would help us better understand the survey respondents. That is, demographic information would greatly assist future analysis. Fourth, researchers must be careful not to inject bias by listing “organizational buying behavior” as an example for the “most important” course topic. This requires additional pretesting of the survey instrument. Finally, it is important not to mix findings with such opinions as: schools do not give credit for writing cases and a single textbook would improve the business marketing offering in business schools. If these questions are directly asked the respondents, then there will be stronger empirical support of their truth.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

If we return to the formative days of marketing, primary effort was placed upon distribution and consumer behavior. Business marketing has often been covered superficially in basic marketing classes, because few professors had the interest or the expertise—either practical or academic—to teach an entire business marketing class. Many marketing academicians produced in the 1970s and 80s were consumer behaviorists and business marketers were a minority. Second, there is more information/research conducted in consumer behavior and this subject is viewed by many deans and chairs as being a more academic course to teach. Third, it is probably assumed that fewer graduates will work in business marketing and therefore the importance of this career

path is downplayed in classes. In fact, recent research has documented that few college graduates seek a career in business marketing but prefer careers in advertising, marketing management, or public relations. These students reported they were not sufficiently counseled about business marketing opportunities (Honeycutt et al., 1997).

Perhaps a graduate text would improve the ability to deliver higher quality instruction in business marketing, but unless instructors who currently teach in the area are surveyed, it is difficult to draw this conclusion. It would also be beneficial to have access to additional business marketing cases and current information about happenings in specific industries. Some of this information can be gleaned from the trade press, but more specific data are often difficult to gather. One possible way to improve the availability of business marketing information is to establish an Internet bulletin board—perhaps by the B2B academic group—to serve as a clearinghouse. A major hurdle that remains, however, is that, because of its proprietary nature, many industries and companies are reluctant to share specific information. This is especially true of their product failures and ethical breaches.

In conclusion, I agree with the authors that business marketing is important, is not taught at the level it should be, and that sufficient materials are not currently available. Additional research must be conducted, however, in order to answer many of the questions raised by the original article and this commentary. The authors are to be commended for researching and establishing a benchmark for this important topic and I hope my remarks assist their future research, as well as that of others, in some small way.

REFERENCE

- Honeycutt, Earl D., Jr., John B. Ford, Michael J. Swenson, and William R. Swinyard (1998), "Student Preferences for Sales Careers Around the Pacific-Rim: Implications for Industrial Marketers," *Industrial Marketing Management*, in press.