

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

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ABSTRACT. This commentary reinforces appropriateness of Bloom’s (1956) taxonomy of educational objectives for providing a systematic framework for evaluating the B2B Marketing textbook. It suggests how the operationalization of the taxonomy, the assessment criteria and application can be enhanced. First, the criteria need to include evaluation of the textbook on its substantive aspects in addition to the formal aspects. Specifically, the issues of conceptual complexity (Santa and Burstyne 1977), information overload and the treatment of the subject matter as they impede or facilitate the student progression on the hierarchy of educational objectives, need to be included in the assessment process. Second, the assessment methodology should be supplemented by expert judgment method for selecting appropriate sample of subject matter from the textbook, in addition to the use of random sampling method. Last, the commentary raises several challenges and implications for B2B Marketing textbook writers in the areas of the textbook length, topical coverage, pedagogy, orientation and positioning of the textbook. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2002 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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Bacchus, Muehlfield, and Okaye's article, "Business-to-Business Marketing Textbooks: A Comparative Review" makes an important contribution to business marketing education. At the very outset, I would like to commend the authors for their painstaking effort to systematically derive the criteria and evaluate the leading textbooks on B2B marketing. Benjamin Bloom's (1956) taxonomy of educational objectives serves as an appropriate framework for the criteria. B2B marketing faculty members and the authors of the textbooks stand to gain from the comparative review, which is done quite objectively and impartially. The faculty member gains insight on the textbook selection decision variables as well as the issues surrounding the determination of B2B marketing content, approaches, pedagogical direction, and the overall course mission. Clearly, selecting a textbook for the B2B marketing course at the undergraduate or graduate level is an important decision, and deserves careful consideration for effective execution of the course strategy. Many of us view the textbook as a prime component of instruction and do rely on it heavily to structure and organize the course, and, the issue has not been addressed sufficiently in the literature.

Almost three-quarters of today's graduates become employed in firms that manufacture and market products and services for non-consumer markets. My informal conversations with several students, who enroll in B2B marketing courses at Bentley College as a part of their preparation to pursue a career in the B2B marketing arena, do hold on to their textbooks long after they have graduated. Perhaps they feel equipped and assured of their resources and skills, having that book on their shelves. It is not unusual for the student to buy an updated edition of the book if they perceive its value in terms of gaining the latest insights on B2B research findings and industry practices. Thus, these students could account for a continuously expanding revenue stream for the textbook publishers. The textbook authors, therefore, should find the review useful in terms of determining what major or minor revisions, if any, are warranted to update their textbooks to effectively serve two of their prime constituencies: marketing students and faculty. Bloom's (1956) taxonomy and its operationalization, should become a catalyst for streamlining and revitalizing the educational objectives as they relate to each major B2B marketing topic and hence, the pedagogy of the text for treating the material. The purposes of this commentary, therefore, are to reinforce the appropriateness of the taxonomy, and to recommend an enhancement to its operationalization and assessment through the inclusion of a qualitative review

and judgment method. Specifically, we raise an issue of student information overload and the challenges that the textbook authors must face to address it.

ABOUT THE TAXONOMY

Bloom's (1956) taxonomy seems to be an appropriate framework for evaluating B2B textbooks. The practical significance of this taxonomy has been well acknowledged and documented in the educational literature across several disciplines (e.g., Anderson 1999; Bower 1981; and Chacon 1992). Even industry practitioners have recommended and expect the B2B marketing course to provide students not only the fundamentals of B2B marketing concepts, practices and techniques (the knowledge based educational objectives) but to impart students with higher level skill sets emphasizing the application, analytical, managerial, critical thinking and research capabilities (e.g., Clabaugh et al. 1995). The taxonomy thus remains a prime framework for defining the educational objectives of the textbook as well as influencing the faculty member's instructional goals and strategies. The taxonomy is robust enough to encompass the fundamental cognitive abilities and application skills that we all desire in our students. By applying this taxonomy as the evaluative criteria, all dimensions that define the textbook are analyzed and compared.

ENHANCEMENT OF THE CRITERIA AND ITS APPLICATION

The assessment criteria and its application could be enhanced to better serve the faculty member's textbook selection decision and adaptation. First, the operationalization of the knowledge criteria needs to be broadened to examine the issue of conceptual complexity in treating the subject matter. Higher levels of information overload as it arises from conceptual complexity are likely to hinder the achievement of such educational objectives as knowledge, understandability, and application of the subject matter. Conceptual complexity is a function of the number of new concepts and the conceptual and operational definitions of each new concept, which students must learn. The more scientific the language or technical jargon that is used to illustrate the concept, the higher the conceptual complexity. While one's tolerance for technical jargon and sentence structure is also a function of one's reading ability and fa-

miliarity level with the subject matter (e.g., concepts, topics, and industry practices) as well as business acumen in relating it to the changing world of business, when conceptual complexity reaches a certain level, students experience conceptual overload, a point where ability and amount of material to learn is impaired due to lack of familiarity with or comprehension of the topic under study (e.g., Kintsch 1975, Santa and Burstyn 1977; and Chacon, 1992). Inability to process or comprehend fully the meaning, implications, or significance of the concepts and practices can be frustrating. It can hinder the student from completing reading assignments efficiently and progressing effectively through the hierarchy of learning goals on his or her own. Consequently, the lack of student preparation and/or attention in the class may force the instructor to conduct the lectures or learning activities at a merely conceptual or theoretical level.

The issue of conceptual complexity is especially relevant and important, as it is likely to be present in B2B marketing textbooks. Both the quantity and the sophistication of the relevant published research findings (Reid et al. 2000) as well as information technology related B2B marketing concepts, business models, and practices have increased sharply. Perhaps no other field is characterized by such rapid growth and diversity. Furthermore, B2B marketing has a vast body of its own as well as having been enriched by several other disciplines including organizational behavior, management science, economics, accounting, information technology systems and a broad spectrum of marketing disciplines. Both of these factors increase the potential for conceptual complexity. Furthermore, an increase in the sheer number of concepts or topics compounds the problem. Impetus to include topics and research findings come from faculty members who look for more and more coverage of traditional, new and emerging B2B marketing themes, practices, and concepts in a B2B marketing textbook. Employers in B2B marketing firms also prefer the textbook to cover a broad range of B2B marketing themes, concepts and practices. At the same time, they want the textbook to have provided enough insights on how to apply the concepts and processes in making marketing decisions in various contextual situations and implement major B2B marketing tasks and activities such as developing sales forecasts, determining personal selling strategies unique to each organization, how to implement closer/collaborative working relationships with business partners and how to effectively utilize the potential of B2B marketing technology. A mere cataloguing of newer B2B marketing concepts, technology, and

research findings with scientific conceptual/operational definitions, therefore, may not achieve the effective transfer of knowledge goal. The very notion of understanding implies that the student has the ability and knowledge of how to apply the standard formal knowledge as well as how to vary it from one situation to another. It is the integration and illustration of marketing significance and implications of the current concepts and major research findings, which when presented in simple and coherent writing style from a practitioner point of view, would allow the student to gain mastery of the subject matter as well as permit wider coverage of course material per unit of study time. The basic proposition is that in order for students to move beyond the theoretical domain of learning, the newer concepts and practices need to be relatively easy to read and easily digested.

The authors' efforts in operationlizing the knowledge, understanding, and application criteria, therefore, are commendable. While the books' formal structure index (e.g., number of characters per line and number of lines per page), the readability level index (e.g., LIX), the visualization levels, and the number of themes covered in a passage, are the first steps in the assessment process of the knowledge and application criteria, they may not reflect the extent of the conceptual complexity problem that may be present. The assessment process, therefore, should be supplemented by qualitative review including the use of an expert judgment method, and involvement of a sample of potential B2B marketing students in the process, to gain first hand insights on the problem. Subjective judgment is also required to select appropriate topics or concepts in addition to a random samples of topics, for examining the conceptual complexity and student information overload issue.

For those teaching the next generation of B2B marketers, as well as the B2B marketing textbook authors, reducing conceptual complexity will be more important than ever before given the rapid pace of change and the emergence of relatively new and more complex B2B marketing processes and models. But once students have developed a solid foundation for newer concepts, processes or schemes of business models, it is less difficult to incorporate them into their mental representations. In addressing the problem, therefore, B2B marketing textbook authors must confront several key questions:

1. How to determine the optimal number as well as the mix of current and relatively new or emerging B2B marketing topics that need to be covered in the book?

2. How much emphasis needs to be put on the relatively new topics as well as the traditional topics or practices which do not add much incremental value to the book and are becoming less relevant to current B2B models and practices?

This is an important issue, as it would affect overall length of the textbook, which influences the faculty member's B2B marketing textbook selection. It is preferable to maintain the length at a reasonable level. Until some of the older, less relevant or prevalent topics and material that add little incremental value to the book in terms of their usefulness to students or B2B marketing practices, are deleted or de-emphasized, the potential problem of student information overload will exist. Consequently, we need to rethink how much attention and coverage should be devoted to the traditional topics (e.g., differences between consumer and business marketing, global marketing issues, ethical marketing dilemmas, performance measurement, or transaction versus commodity approaches) and the emerging B2B marketing themes and practices (e.g., value-creation framework/processes, relationship marketing strategies/tactics, managing close working relationships with business partners/network organizations, or marketing of IT, e-commerce, internet marketing products). Another important issue is how to treat these topics. Should they be treated in separate chapters, integrated with other topics, deleted or covered through case studies?

3. How to treat the newer B2B marketing themes and topics pedagogically in the text, and to which level of Bloom's (1956) hierarchy of educational objectives to aspire? Should a concept be merely introduced and described? Illustrated for applications and marketing implications? Discussed for their managerial significance? Or analyzed for assessing potential solutions to B2B marketing issues and decisions? Or should all of these aspects be included?

The importance and the growing acceptance of each topic or concept in question would certainly provide answers to many of the above questions. However, the specific pedagogical orientation and approaches might vary from topic-to-topic in their treatment in the textbook. Again this has to be in concert with the textbook's positioning focus (e.g., value-creation based focus in the Anderson and Narus (1999) text), the specific overall orientation in treating the subject matter (e.g., manage-

rial, research, descriptive), and the pedagogy (e.g., short case, diagrams, illustrations) that the textbook author(s) select as an executional strategy for the entire textbook.

The textbook orientation and pedagogy can go a long way in facilitating the achievement of higher-level of learning goals on the taxonomy. The case method is certainly instrumental to establishing the theory-practice link as well as integrating several B2B marketing decisions variables. Designing, developing, or obtaining case studies with a decision focus, whether comprehensive or concise, would be a formidable task, especially if the cases involved current marketing situations and buying behavior issues involving buyers and sellers of IT, e-commerce or Internet products, and incorporating maturing philosophies of building closer and more durable marketing relationships. However, it will enhance the value of the book for students as well as faculty members. Consequently, a quantitative assessment regarding whether the textbook contains cases or how many should be supplemented by a qualitative review of the currentness and the importance of marketing situations that are represented in those cases.

Another pedagogical tool that is likely to address the conceptual complexity problem, and assist in achieving higher-level learning goals of the taxonomy, is the glossary of terms. Generally, textbooks append the glossary at the end of the book, or list key terms at the end of the chapter, and/or provide a subject index. However, a glossary of terms (concepts, practices) as it pertains to each chapter, if prominently featured at the beginning of each chapter, perhaps following the chapter behavioral objectives, might be more productive. It would provide explanations of the concept up front along with a behavioral objective, which should facilitate a high level of comprehension for its application, and its relationship with other concepts in the chapter.

Lastly, appropriateness (or suitability) of the textbooks to graduate or undergraduate levels, although not directly considered in the textbook assessment process, does come out as an important criterion in the analysis stage by the authors, for positioning the B2B marketing textbook. An interrelated issue relates to the focus of the book, i.e., whether the B2B marketing book should emphasize mainly core or fundamentals of B2B marketing concepts and practices, or to present a specialized focus, such as one pursued by Anderson and Narus (1999). The textbook at the undergraduate level perhaps would be more useful and consistent with preferences (or requirements) of B2B marketing employers if it focused more on the fundamentals and core practices, in terms of preparing students for

entry to mid-level positions. Students need that resource, know-how and repertoire of skills to enter a B2B marketing career effectively. On the other hand, graduate students who would have more than likely completed the entire curriculum of business and marketing courses at the undergraduate level, and have had some industry experience, and an understanding of current marketing and business practices, might benefit a lot more from a book that adopts a specialized focus or philosophical marketing perspective of growing importance and acceptance by industry practitioners. The challenge of creating a book with such a specialized focus, e.g., value creation and relationship marketing, would be how to adopt the core processes and marketing fundamentals covered in the previous editions of the textbook to best implement the specialized focus.

CONCLUDING SUMMARY

The main purpose of this commentary is to reinforce the need to expand upon the textbook criteria and assessment process as suggested by the authors. Based upon my own personal experience and observations associated with teaching and selecting textbooks for B2B marketing courses, I have indicated how the evaluative criteria and assessment process, and consequently, the operationalization of Bloom's (1956) taxonomy of learning goals, can be enhanced. In the process, I have identified several issues for further scrutiny in the areas of topical coverage, textbook pedagogy and orientation, length of the textbook, and positioning of the textbook for graduate and undergraduate levels. These issues are linked to conceptual complexity and student information overload problems that a B2B marketing textbook may present, and how or why that might impede the student's effective progression through the hierarchy of learning goals on Bloom's (1956) taxonomy. Furthermore, consistent with the authors' direction for future work in this area, I do echo that the assessment process and methodology should be supplemented by the use of subjective and expert judgment methods for selecting a sample of topics and material (e.g., case studies, diagrams) for evaluating the textbook on the taxonomy of learning goals. The commentary also raises several challenges and implications, therefore, for B2B marketing textbook writers.

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