

Mission-driven Marketing Education: Practical Approaches and Problems

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One of the stated purposes of this conference is “to provide practical curricular models and ideas that reflect the mission and identity of business education at a Catholic university.” In this paper we wish to present some approaches we have used to help undergraduate and graduate business students integrate the mission values of a Catholic university into their way of thinking about the field of marketing. Specifically, we describe several discussion topics that, in our view, are useful for laying the groundwork for mission-driven marketing education. In addition, we describe a few assignments that prompt students to reflect more deeply on marketing issues. These discussions and assignments relate to understanding the general scope of business ethics and the role of marketing in society, as well as to fostering students’ skill development in making marketing decisions that are consistent with both Catholic values and business acumen. We conclude this paper by sharing some challenges we have faced in our attempts to promote the integration of mission and marketing education.

A prior issue: What is the scope of business ethics?

One of the obstacles that has to be overcome in teaching business ethics in mission-driven schools is the common tendency to imagine that ethics has to do primarily with obeying laws. Most of the attention that business ethics has received in recent years has been due to the occurrence of large-scale, high-profile ethics scandals. In almost all of these cases, there was a combination of law-breaking and grossly unethical behavior on the part of the perpetrators. The public response to the scandals has been outrage, and Congress, the SEC, and other regulators have scrambled to put in place a set of laws and regulations (with accompanying sanctions) designed to prevent further scandals from occurring. Many companies have adopted codes of ethics, appointed ethics officers or ombudsmen, and put various types of ethics training and compliance measures in place. The primary focus of these efforts is to identify and prevent, or at least substantially decrease the likelihood of, criminal or blatantly unethical activity.

This standard approach could be called an “ethics of compliance.” It views the goal of ethics as getting people to follow laws and rules, and it usually relies on the fear of punishment as the motive that will induce people to comply. The ethics of compliance is generally negative in tone: “Don’t break the law, or else!” Compliance is a good and absolutely essential thing; but restricting the meaning of “ethical conduct in business” to the avoidance of illegal or obviously unethical activity hinders business people from seeing the full scope of their ethical obligations.

An ethics of compliance can be contrasted with a more demanding “ethics of surplus,” which goes beyond compliance by recognizing the good of being generous with one’s extra resources.

Its motive is the desire to be generous, at least from time to time, or to “give back” to the community. This is a praiseworthy approach. Nevertheless, it tends to encourage the notion that being ethical is something extra that people are supposed to do once they’ve taken care of their own needs. As a result, this approach can lull business people into thinking that if they’ve complied with the law and been generous to a charity or some socially responsible cause, there are no further challenges of ethical performance to meet.

But beyond an ethics of surplus is what Bernard Lonergan has called an “ethics of achievement.” According to this approach, the goal of ethics is not just to avoid evil, nor even just to give one’s extra resources to those who need them, but to add value in all situations and relationships. As applied to business, being committed to an ethics of achievement means trying to view every stakeholder relationship and every transaction as an opportunity for doing good by operating in an intelligent and responsible way. This is not about spectacular gestures; rather, it’s a matter of seeing ethics not as an “extra” but as an intrinsic component of business performance.

Students are asked to find and discuss examples of each of the three approaches to business ethics. They usually discover that the approaches are not pure types, and that a number of companies are operating in a way that indicates a “stretching towards” the standard of the ethics of achievement. The goal of the assignment is for the students to realize not only that an ethics of achievement is compatible with the needs of a successful business, but also that it connects with their own desire for good in a deeper and more direct way than the other two approaches to business ethics.

What is marketing’s role in society?

Marketing and Society Reflection Paper. In their 1999 article, “Marketing’s Contributions to Society,” Wilkie and Moore illuminate the breadth of the impact of marketing on the daily life of consumers as well as on the aggregate economic system. This assignment stems from the perspective offered in that work. Students are asked to consider the effects of new products on society by reflecting on a product (or service) developed roughly in their lifetimes that has actually made their lives better or has changed how they live in some significant way. (Parents’ lives and lifetimes may also be included to broaden the set of products that students choose.) They also consider both the positive and negative social and cultural ramifications of the widespread use of these products in order to recognize the importance of marketing in modern life. This assignment works best when given early in the course, and when preceded by a fairly lengthy class discussion in which students examine a few examples (e.g., cell phones, microwaves, and automobiles) as a group to facilitate their thinking about the ways that a product can actually change a society. In particular, this discussion serves well as a lead-in to a unit on ethics because it helps students appreciate the fact that marketing often involves making decisions that can dramatically impact society, even when no clear ethical dilemma is present.

Discussion of Society’s Perception of Marketers. Every year since 1976, Gallup has conducted a poll on the ethics and honesty of various professions, and the results are publicized each December. Perhaps not surprisingly, marketing, advertising, and sales professionals rank near the very bottom of the list each year (along with, but even lower than, business executives, lawyers,

and politicians in the most recent poll). Presenting these results in class creates an opportunity for students to consider the factors that contribute to society's unfavorable view of the marketing field. Furthermore, the professor can initiate a meaningful classroom discussion on professional duties and get students thinking about their future careers and what role they, as graduates of a Catholic business school, might play in changing the practices that give rise to these perceptions.

How can we help students develop skills to make mission-consistent marketing decisions?

Bernard Lonergan's model of authentic knowing and deciding. This model, which students can validate on the basis of their own experience, helps people focus on the specific activities of the mind and the heart that lead to good decisions, and learn to identify internal and external obstacles that tend to prevent them from performing those activities effectively. Those activities are paying attention to data, exploring in order to understand, verifying the correctness of one's understanding, and deliberating/deciding. These activities can be mapped as a pair of loops, one devoted to diagnosing situations, the other to planning how to deal with situations. Each loop is essentially a pattern of questions and answers that occur spontaneously in any person who is seriously trying to solve a problem and do the right thing. In other words, Lonergan's model purports to be an accurate description of what human beings do when they are at their best. It provides a template for helping people avoid decision failures of the type discussed in Paul C. Nutt's book, *Why Decisions Fail: Avoiding the Blunders and Traps That Lead to Debacles*.

If one is oriented to the ethics of achievement, trying to do good with one's business insofar as it is possible, then making good decisions – decisions that don't waste resources of time, energy, money, and so on – is crucial. Students can be given exercises in which they use Lonergan's model to evaluate their own experience of situations in which they did a better or worse job of learning, problem-solving, or reaching a decision. In doing so, they discover typical obstacles – some external, some internal – that they encounter in getting around the loops. The students then are asked to identify steps they could take to diminish the influence of those obstacles.

Consumer Sovereignty Test. Craig Smith's 1995 article, "Marketing Strategies for the Ethics Era," outlined the Consumer Sovereignty Test as a practical tool for making ethical decisions in marketing. This framework proposes three dimensions that marketing managers must consider in order to achieve ethical outcomes in their marketing decisions. The first is consumer capability, which considers whether consumers are vulnerable with respect to any aspect of the current decision context, perhaps due to factors such as age, education, experience, income, etc. In order to remain on the "right" side of the ethics line, marketers must ensure that consumers remain sovereign by not taking advantage of consumers' vulnerabilities. The second dimension is information, which concerns whether consumers have adequate information to make a good decision in a given situation. Marketers must ensure consumer sovereignty by not deceiving or misleading consumers but also by not withholding information which consumers would need to adequately judge whether their expectations will be met by the good or service about which they are deciding. The third dimension is choice, which considers whether consumers truly have more than one alternative about what to buy or from whom to buy in the present decision context, or whether their options are constrained by lack of competition or switching costs. Marketers must

ensure consumer sovereignty by not seeking to eliminate consumers' abilities to take their business elsewhere if one provider's goods or services are not desirable or if any aspect of a transaction leaves them dissatisfied.

This three-point test provides students with a fairly simple way of analyzing the ethical dimensions of any decision about marketing to consumers. In addition, the Consumer Sovereignty Test framework can also be combined with a traditional stakeholder analysis to examine how other stakeholders (e.g., employees, shareholders, community) might be impacted by a marketing decision. If students are familiarized with this framework early in the term, it can be used throughout the rest of the course to examine potential ethics pitfalls in marketing decisions.

The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly Advertising Assignment. The social and ethical criticisms of advertising are numerous: it promotes materialism, it encourages impossible standards of beauty, it reinforces negative stereotypes, it preys on consumers' insecurities, it takes advantage of the vulnerability of children and other groups, it is distasteful and undermines standards of decency, etc. On the other hand, some companies have taken the lead in trying to counter some of these criticisms with their advertising efforts. For example, Dove's "Campaign for Real Beauty" has tried to take a proactive approach in building the self-esteem of women and girls by featuring images of ordinary women rather than models, and by actively promoting positive and affirming messages. After a class discussion of both the criticisms of advertising and its impact on society, and of some of the general benefits of advertising and examples of positive campaigns, students are given an assignment to find and write about three ads: one Good, one Bad, and one Ugly. Bad and Ugly ads are those that serve as examples of the approaches that are the target of many social and ethical criticisms of advertising: Bad ads perpetuate problems, and Ugly ads go beyond that to being offensive. In contrast, Good ads are those that proactively counter one or more of the criticisms; that is, Good ads don't just fail to offend or perpetuate problems, they promote positive images and meanings. For each ad chosen, students write a commentary in which they thoughtfully discuss the ad and its implications. The objective of the assignment is to help students learn to recognize the underlying messages present in the advertising that consumers are exposed to each day, and at the same time to raise their awareness of advertising that rises above the "lowest common denominator." Hopefully, those who pursue careers in this field will think about these concrete examples and hold themselves responsible for their own contributions to advertising's conversation with consumers.

For further discussion: What are the challenges in integrating mission-related material into marketing courses?

1. It is difficult to address the problems of materialism and over-consumption (e.g., the value placed on having more over being more, the threats to the environment from over-consumption), particularly in the context of a marketing manager's objectives, which may be contrary to these concerns (e.g., to maximize sales). And more broadly, how does a professor get students to notice a blind spot that is shared by so much of our culture?

2. How can we help marketing managers incorporate the “preferential option for the poor” in their strategic decisions? Talking about this issue in the context of the ethics of achievement rather than the ethics of surplus might help, but it is difficult to get managers to think about this issue on a regular basis, especially in view of the reigning “shareholder view” of the purpose of business.

3. Faculty members often are not clear as to whether they should specifically discuss “Catholic social teaching” rather than taking a more general “common good” approach that does not rely on explicit Catholic tenets. Many faculty members feel that they are already being asked to stretch beyond their comfort zones in addressing ethical or normative issues, which seems to them a violation of the idea that in the classroom, teachers should generally remain neutral with respect to value questions.

4. The fact that there is a scattershot approach to ethics in many business schools makes it difficult to deal with ethics in any depth. Students come with different levels of ethical awareness and education, and most business curricula either do not weave ethics throughout their courses in a systematic, integrated way, or else they offer a stand-alone business course that comes relatively late in the sequence and does not connect organically with what faculty in various departments are doing to cover ethics topics in their particular courses.

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