

INCORPORATING SOCIAL MARKETING INTO AN INTRODUCTORY MARKETING COURSE CURRICULUM: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Today there is general agreement that social marketing aims to benefit society by changing the behavior of individuals through the application of traditional marketing principles (Kotler & Lee, 2008; Andreasen, 2002). Social marketing attempts to improve society by focusing on behaviors that protect i) the health and safety of individuals (e.g., smoking cessation), ii) the environment (e.g., water conservation), or iii) community well-being (e.g., literacy). Social marketing encompasses all of the activities central to commercial marketing, for example, market segmentation, consideration of environmental forces, and strategies centered on the 4Ps (Andreasen, 2002). It differs from commercial marketing, however, by focusing on social rather than financial gain, and on behavior change rather than goods and services. In social marketing, competition arises from competing behaviors rather than from providers of similar goods and services. Social marketing also requires different skill sets. Because social marketing often attempts to promote behavior that individuals do not want to perform (e.g., reducing water use), long-term effort and special levels of commitment are required to achieve social marketing goals. These important differences suggest that marketing students need to understand social marketing to appreciate the full scope of marketing. Incorporating social marketing into core marketing curricula provides students with a more complete understanding of the breadth of marketing. It also affords students a unique opportunity to wed interests in business with concerns for society.

Regrettably, few universities include social marketing in their course offerings (Rundle-Thiele & Wymer, 2009) or incorporate social marketing concepts into other courses (Bridges & Wilhelm, 2008). We contend that social marketing concepts can be effectively taught through a group Social Marketing Plan (SMP) project that i) applies social marketing concepts, ii) focuses on the environment, and iii) involves students from other disciplines. Participation in an SMP project also affords students the deep learning that comes from active participation in an interdisciplinary team. We suggest that our proposed strategy for incorporating social marketing principles into a core marketing course is an effective way to prepare students to “contribute to organizations and the larger society” and to enable them to “grow personally and professionally” (AACSB, 2008, p.1).

The SMP was included as a class project in an introductory marketing course for sophomores. Teams of four to five students conducted an analysis and recommended marketing strategies designed to encourage people to adopt a specific behavior that would benefit the environment. At the end of the semester, teams presented their analyses and recommendations orally and in written form. SMP team projects contributed twenty percent of the grade for the course. Each team worked with a senior Environmental Science (ES) student who, as part of their course requirement, was expected to provide scientific justification for the marketing team’s recommended behavior changes. The ES project had its own set of learning goals and requirements and was independently graded by the ES instructor. Marketing and ES students were expected to meet together a minimum of three times.

The SMP project’s impact on students’ knowledge was assessed with pre- and post-project comparisons of declarative marketing knowledge. The test consisted of a mixture of multiple-choice, open-ended, and fill-in-the-blank questions. Pre-project tests were administered during the third week of the semester. Post-project tests were administered during the penultimate week of classes. Pre-and post marketing knowledge tests were also completed by a control group not required to complete a SMP project. Awareness of environmental issues and willingness to take actions to preserve the environment were assessed with pre- and post-project consumer ECOSCALEs (Stone et al., 1995). The pre- and post-project comparisons revealed significant increases in marketing knowledge ($t(37) = 1.65$, one-tail $p = .05$), environmental awareness ($t(62) = 1.64$, one-tail $p = .05$) and willingness to act to preserve the environment ($t(62) = 1.73$, one-tail $p = .04$). The marketing knowledge scores of SMP participants were marginally greater than those of the control group ($t(72) = 1.27$, one-tail $p = .10$). Students’ appreciation for other disciplines and for working on interdisciplinary teams was also assessed at the end of the semester. Results showed that SMP participants appreciated the value of working on an interdisciplinary team ($t(63) = 10.5$, $p < .001$) and believed that future SMP projects should include a student from another discipline ($t(61) = 16.1$, $p < .001$). The results provide support for the view that an SMP project is an effective way to teach commercial and social marketing concepts.

References Available on Request.