

THE PERSONAL COMPUTER AS A RESEARCH TOOL
IN CONSUMER BEHAVIOR CLASSES

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Abstract

For the professional marketer of the 1980's and 90's, the personal computer will be increasingly important tool of the trade. Relevant applications will include: 1) local statistical analysis of data, 2) interfacing with a mainframe for more elaborate statistical procedures or larger samples, and 3) accessing national data bases in bibliographic research and/or the collection of demographic data. For this reason, it is important that exposure to the personal computer as a research tool be incorporated into marketing curricula. This paper describes and evaluates a set of assignments that seeks to integrate this objective into a Consumer Behavior class.

Introduction

The personal computer is rapidly becoming an important tool of the managerial trade. Business Week reports that today, 213,000 executives are using personal computers in their work, with that number expected to rise to 394,000 by 1985. (Business Week, 7/11/82, p.56.) For marketers this need can be especially acute. The information explosion, made possible to a large extent by national data bases with vast storage capability and very rapid user access, and the need for specialized marketing analyses create severe information pressures on the marketer. In order to respond to rapidly changing market conditions, the marketer must be able to collect, analyze, and apply large amounts of information on a timely basis.

The personal computer can enhance the marketer's ability to meet this challenge. By accessing national data bases and/or remote mainframes the marketer can perform extensive bibliographic research or execute specialized statistical analyses very quickly and efficiently. For budding marketers to realize this potential, it is important that they gain exposure to these techniques as early in their careers as possible. Toward this end, the author produced computer assignments designed to provide this exposure and incorporated them into a Consumer Behavior course. This paper describes and evaluates those assignments and the personal computer system used.

The Assignments

The assignments described here are part of the requirements for the author's course in Consumer Behavior. There are two research projects: one primary, one secondary, which are assigned to teams of 4-6 students.

The first project requires secondary research on an international marketing problem. Specifically, each group evaluates a different country as a potential market for the export of packaged food products. Demographic, economic, and cultural data are gathered and evaluated. In the relevant computer assignment, students are required to access and search a national data base for marketing information pertaining to their assigned country. The resulting data is to be incorporated into their team report.

The second project is a primary research study involving the administration, coding, analysis, and interpretation of a pre-existing questionnaire. In this project the personal computer is used as a means of creating SPSS files, coding survey data, transmitting the complete data files to a mainframe computer, and executing SPSS runs. In other words, students learn how to use the personal computer to control the powerful capabilities of SPSS on the mainframe from their desktop. A description of the microcomputer configuration used and the methods for administering these assignments is available on request.

Evaluating the Assignments

These computer assignments were evaluated by students using an evaluation questionnaire. This evaluation took the form of a 12-item, Likert-type questionnaire. Students were asked to express their agreement or disagreement with a series of nine statements on the benefits of the assignments and three recommendations for their future use. On the 1 to 5 scale, 1 represented strong agreement and 5 strong disagreement.

For the nine benefit statements the mean responses clustered around 2.0. The strongest agreement was expressed with the statements that the assignments: 1) were a beneficial research technique, 2) illustrated relevant applications, and 3) provided useful information. Milder agreement was expressed with statements that the assignments: 1) were interesting and stimulating, 2) were relevant to other course assignments, 3) saved a significant amount of time, 4) made me feel more comfortable with small computers, 5) were an effective learning exercise, and 6) were a valuable part of the course. In the recommendation questions, students expressed agreement that these assignments should be retained as part of the course and that similar assignments should be included in other marketing courses. However, they were indifferent as to whether more computer assignments should be made in the Consumer Behavior course.

In their open ended written comments students replied that the assignments were valuable because they had: 1) increased students' familiarity with micros, 2) given them training in an important skill, 3) were interesting, and 4) (groan) were much better than lectures. On the other hand they critiqued the assignments as: 1) having insufficient introduction time, 2) not providing enough hands-on experience, and 3) not providing enough time to finish the second assignment. They recommended that more computer-related instruction precede the assignments and that all assigned activities be performed at a slower pace in order to achieve greater understanding and comprehension of the processes.

Conclusions and Recommendations

My general conclusions are that these assignments are good, but could be better. Specifically, I would make the following recommendations for improvement.

First, the assignments need to be given sufficient introduction to provide both operational and conceptual continuity. To maximize a student's benefit from the assignments, that student should understand not only the operating procedures involved, but also the reasons for using the personal computer in this manner. That is, students should understand the "Why?" in addition to the "How?" of the application.

Second, individual hands on experience seems to be the part of this type of assignment which students like most and which is most effective. Therefore, this type of experience should be maximized. It should be recognized, however, that this recommendation requires a substantial investment in equipment, and/or instruction time.

Finally, the choice of a national data base to access is an important one. Available data bases which are appropriate include Management Contents and ABI Inform in the DIALOG service and Information Bank II from the New York Times News Retrieval service.

In short, I believe that the personal computer can be a very important research tool for practicing marketers. Moreover, the type of assignment described and evaluated here can be a very effective means of preparing marketing students to use this tool.