

"TOFI MANAGEMENT, INC.": AN EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISE REGARDING THE
LONG-TERM IMPLICATIONS OF SOME TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATIONS

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Abstract

There have been some technological developments during the past few years, which will have a significant impact on marketing and management practices only a decade or two from now. This exercise is intended to provoke thought and discussion about the long-term social and managerial implications of such innovations. The case is one that captures the interest because of its unique setting, and induces lively discussion. The debriefing session at the end of the exercise is used to create awareness of the different points of view that emerge during the discussion.

Introduction

The purpose of the paper, which is summarized below, is to illustrate: (1) The utility of a case based in the future, to construct hypothetical scenarios of what may well happen 20 years from today. This is intended not as a prediction, but as a "straw man" to force participants to think of the long-term future, construct their own scenarios and develop appropriate strategies. (2) An experiential exercise with role-playing, debriefing sessions, etc. Unfortunately, neither of the above objectives can effectively be fulfilled without the benefit of the complete case and experiential exercise, which is impractical within the existing space constraints. (The interested reader is referred to ICCH Case Nos. 9-579-634 and 5-579-635).

In general, experiential exercises and class discussions tend to revolve around an immediate problem or a crisis situation. This is perhaps reflective of the "real world", because most problems in society, government, business, etc. are immediate ones. Without detracting from the utility and relevance of such exercises, the present work recognizes the value of a careful look at the long-term future of marketing in particular, and social communications in general. The most pragmatic and down-to-earth individuals should be encouraged to emerge, even if briefly, from discussion of immediate problems, and think about the future. This case exercise attempts to do just that.

The format of the description of this exercise is similar to, though not exactly the same as, the one used by Pressley [79]. The major differences include a section on debriefing, using some suggestions of Warrick et al [79]; and a brief discussion on validation techniques.

Summary of the Case: TOFI MANAGEMENT, INC.

This case is set in the year 1998. It traces the "history" of the preceding 20 years, during which interactive TV and electronic funds transfer became commonplace for purchasing and marketing research (the former) activities. In addition, a "consumer information system" (similar to Consumer Reports) rating was available for most product categories at the touch of a button on a TV console. This enhanced the role of the "product concept", and made pricing the major decision variable. The decline of marketing and the retail distribution system as we know them today, followed. An "efficiency" or "information" orientation tended to replace a "people" orientation.

The case is not intended to foretell doom, but to force individuals to think of the long-term future and the "information revolution." In that context, cases such as these, although "soft", may serve to illustrate the role of "management fiction" (of which the title is an anagram) in management education.

Purpose/Learning Objectives

This case discussion exercise is intended to get participants to think of the implications and long-term future marketing applications of some of the technological innovations of the 1970's.

This purpose is accomplished by role playing and, to some extent, by observation. As Confucius and, later, DeLozier, said: I hear and I forget; I see and I remember; I do and I understand [79].

The case may also serve to illustrate various marketing concepts such as: (i) the marketing mix; (ii) the hierarchy of effects, and intervening variables; (iii) the interaction of marketing with other disciplines, such as Management Information Systems, Economics, Psychology, Sociology, etc.

Experiences With the Exercise

Discussion tends to get quite heated between the "task"-oriented and the "people"-oriented groups. The roles are assigned after the case is read so as to enable participants to choose or request their own roles--this makes for livelier discussion.

Again, the questions are intended to force the participants to make (implicitly) their own predictions of the long-term future, and to justify them.

Tests have been done to examine the utility of this exercise by administering a questionnaire before and after the exercise, designed to measure: (1) sensitivity to the implications of these technological developments and (2) recognition of both sides of the issue: "efficiency-orientation" versus "people-orientation." The hypotheses were that the sensitivity will increase, and that participants will tend to be less dogmatic, after the exercise. The above hypotheses were supported by the data in undergraduate and graduate classes. Another question that was asked before and after the exercise was designed to record the participants' belief that the more information provided, the better it is for the consumers' decision-making. Scores on this question tended to decrease after the exercise, indicating that participants became less hungry for "maximum possible" information.

References

1. M. Wayne DeLozier, "JELS: Its Beginning and Its Future," JELS 1, 4 (1979).
2. Milton M. Pressley, "Hop In Bed With Me". An Industrial Advertising Exercise, JELS 1, 53-64 (1979).
3. D. D. Warrick, et.al, Debriefing Experiential Learning Exercises, JELS 1, 91-100 (1979).