

Marketing Part-Time MBA Programs: Understanding the Need for and Dimensions of Flexibility

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Flexibility likely plays a major role in MBA recruitment in a competitive MBA market, particularly for part-time MBA programs. This begs the question, what does flexibility really mean in regards to education? This paper examines the issue of MBA program flexibility. The paper utilizes exploratory research to help MBA marketers better understand consumers' need for flexibility and to identify dimensions on which MBA marketers can build flexibility into their marketing strategy.

INTRODUCTION

The American labor force has traditionally experienced set work schedules; however, times are changing. With the rise in dual income families, both men and women are spending less time at home and are experiencing increased time pressures. Some businesses are beginning to give credence to these time pressures by granting more flexibility in work scheduling. This flexibility allows workers to better cope with the increased demands on their time. Flexibility is so desirable that some businesses are utilizing flexible scheduling as a benefit to lure talent. Furthermore, some workers are giving up benefits in order to enjoy flexible scheduling (Duff, 2006; Goudreau, 2009; Goldsmith, 2009; Marquez, 2008; Solomon, 2000).

Given that flexibility is becoming an increasingly desired attribute in business, it likely plays a major role in MBA student recruitment in the competitive MBA environment, particularly for part-time MBA programs. This begs the question, what does flexibility mean with regard to education? This paper examines the issue of MBA program flexibility. The paper utilizes exploratory research to help marketers better understand consumers' need for flexibility and to identify dimensions on which MBA marketers can build flexibility into their programs.

UNCERTAINTY IN MBA BUYING BEHAVIOR

The decision to pursue an MBA, in most situations, is a high involvement decision necessitating complex buying behavior (Stiber, 2001; Nicholls, et al. 1995). One factor that makes this a particularly complex decision is that the consumer must commit to participate during the period of time required to complete the degree, generally one to two years. Thus, the consumer must consider his commitments and schedule well into the future when making this decision. This consideration of the future introduces a level of uncertainty to the decision making process. Uncertainty is defined as "the extent to which the future cannot be accurately predicted" (Pfeffer and Salancik's, 1978, p. 67).

The uncertainty of being able to meet the MBA participation requirements is especially prevalent in part-time MBA education because adult students are typically juggling education, job, and possibly family obligations. Each of these obligations has its own set of requirements which likely conflict with one another at different points in time. Therefore, committing to a degree that requires future participation spanning a long period of time will likely have high amounts of uncertainty and risk for consumers.

FLEXIBILITY

Research suggests that potential MBA students will progress through all the various stages of the consumer buying process (Nicholls, et al. 1995; Stiber, 2001), especially pre-purchase evaluation. In this process, consumers try to minimize risk through increased search and evaluation behaviors (Boshoff, 2002; Srinivasan and Ratchford, 1991). In these search and evaluation stages, consumers will compare MBA programs on various evaluative criteria such as reputation, student/teacher ratio, price, location, etc. (Chui and Stembridge, 1999; Coccari and Javalgi, 1995; Stiber, 2001).

In both the goods and services industries, marketers have utilized various methods to help to reduce consumers' risk perceptions including offering warranties, providing free trials, having generous money-back policies, etc. (Blackwell, Miniard and Engle, 2006; Boshoff, 2002; Hoffman and Bateson, 1997; Shifman, 1997). The author contends that incorporating flexibility into the service offering is another important method that marketers could offer in the MBA education market to help reduce consumers' risk perceptions. Furthermore, potential students may utilize the flexibility of the program as an evaluative criterion when comparing MBA programs.

Academicians and practitioners in the MBA arena have not generally viewed flexibility, in and of itself, as an evaluative criterion. It is likely that, over the years, flexibility has been integrated into broader criteria such as program curriculum and variety of offerings (Chui and Stembridge, 1999; Coccari and Javalgi, 1995). Merriam-Webster (2009) defines flexibility as "when something is characterized by a ready capability to adapt to new, different, or changing requirements." The author builds on this and Schellekens and Van Merrienboer's (2003) definition of flexibility with regards to education by defining education program flexibility as "the extent to which an education provider gives students options within the provision of the education service." The author suggests that giving students options in the education service offering will reduce students' risk perceptions by allowing them to better manage their competing priorities.

METHOD

In order to better understand the need for flexibility and the dimensions of flexibility with regards to MBA programs, two exploratory methods were utilized: phenomenological interviewing and open-ended surveys.

Interviews

Phenomenological interviewing was first employed. This research method was chosen due to its exploratory nature and the desire to obtain first-person accounts (Thompson, Locander and Pollio, 1989; Hycner, 1985). Purposive sampling was utilized to discriminate across potential and current MBA consumers. Ten current MBA students (S) and ten potential MBA students (P) were interviewed. The sample consisted of 11 men (M) and 9 women (F). The mean age of the sample was 27 with participants ranging in age from 23 to 41.

The participants were assured anonymity. They signed consent forms indicating the purpose of the study. The interviews were first taped and then transcribed verbatim. The interview dialogue began with questions such as "Describe your decision to pursue an MBA." The interview continued with the participants describing their experiences, thoughts, and feelings. If the interviewee did not mention flexibility in their

decision-making process, the interviewer prompted the interviewee to discuss their thoughts about flexibility. Each interview lasted between 15-30 minutes. The interviews generated 33,657 words.

Open-Ended Survey

In addition to interviewing, open-ended surveys were also utilized. One hundred and seventy MBA students answered the following questions: 1) “University X has a flexible MBA program. Describe what the word flexibility means to you in this context and 2) Describe what a flexible MBA program would look like. Be as thorough as possible.” The mean age of the sample was 30 with participants ranging in age from 24 to 50.

The Interpretation

A Hermeneutic interpretation was conducted on the transcribed interviews and open-ended answers with the three criteria for phenomenological interpretation—the emic approach, autonomy of the text and bracketing (Thompson, Locander and Pollio, 1989) being met. The interpretive group consisted of several individuals. The part-whole iterative process began with the interpretation of each individual response. The interpretation continued with the aim of capturing larger thematic patterns between responses. These thematic patterns were defined utilizing the participants' own responses, and the transcripts and surveys were continuously referenced to ensure the accuracy of the themes.

FINDINGS

The Need for Flexibility

The interviews resulted in a many interesting responses from participants that confirmed their need for flexibility. A sampling of participants' statements has been highlighted to better understand students' need for flexibility. Each statement is coded by male/female (M/F), age and potential/current MBA student (P/C).

- “I need flexibility because I am established in my career, in that I have quite a bit of responsibility. I also have a wife and two kids.” (M, 34, P)
- “I have a lot of commitments in my life and as far as priorities go, graduate school definitely comes after work and my family...The more flexible the program is the better.” (M, 34, C)
- “My work commitments occasionally conflict with school.” (F, 29, C)

As evident from the above statements, MBA students and potential students juggle multiple responsibilities. Unlike many traditional undergraduate students, MBA students are responsible for full-time careers as well as families. It is interesting that note that no interviewee mentioned needing flexibility for personal or leisure time. With increased responsibility comes the need to adapt to changing requirements (i.e. flexibility). MBA students have the need to alter different aspects of their lives in order to attend to the ever-changing demands on their time. Therefore, the author proposes that, assuming all else constant, MBA programs that offer more flexibility will be preferred to programs that offer less flexibility.

Dimensions of Flexibility

Beyond understanding why MBA consumers feel the need for flexibility, the study also examined the various dimensions of flexibility with regards to MBA programs. A better understanding of the term flexibility with regards to MBA education will allow MBA marketers insight into how to develop flexible programs. The question becomes, “How can MBA programs incorporate flexibility into their programs?” The interpretation of the interviews and surveys resulted in many different themes that describe the various dimensions of MBA education flexibility. The identified themes are listed below with highlighted corresponding participant statements. MBA program marketers should understand these dimensions and consider the cost/benefit of building more flexibility into their programs.

Flexibility in Program Completion Duration

This dimension relates to having the ability to determine the duration of the MBA program.

- “If it’s a two year program, have the flexibility to take three or possibly four years to complete.” (M, 40)
- “Finishing in two years just might not happen – but I should not be penalized.” (M, 34)
- “People who want to move through the program at a faster pace can.” (M, 25)
- “Pursuing your degree at your own pace.” (M, 46)

Flexibility in Leaving and Returning to the Program

This dimension relates to whether or not the student can take time-off (one quarter, one year, etc.) and then easily re-enter the program where he left off.

- “Ability to take a semester off if you need to.” (F, 34)
- “Stop and start again.” (F, 32)
- “If you have to miss a quarter, you miss a quarter. Flexibility is huge.” (M, 40)
- “Maybe I have to even take off for a quarter due to work demands.” (M, 34)

Flexibility in Entering the Program at Different Times During the Year

This dimension relates to how many starts the MBA program has. Can the students only start in the fall or can they start year round?

- “Start at any time. At the beginning of any semester.” (F, 27)
- “I really appreciate being able to enter three times a year” (*not flexible if*) “There is one entry point a year.” (M, 28)
- “I was able to start sooner. Starting sooner meant finishing earlier.” (M, 34)
- “Had I gone to X, I would have had to wait a year to start” (M, 34)

Flexibility in Scheduling the Sequence of Courses

This dimension relates to whether or not the MBA program has a strict sequence in which courses must be taken.

- “Allowing students to deviate from the recommended sequence.” (M, 27)
- “Allowing me to flip courses around” (M, 40)
- (*not flexible if*) “Classes must be taken sequentially” (F, 30)
- (*not flexible if*) “They (*classes*) have to be taken in a definite order” (M, 34)

Flexibility in Scheduling Required Courses

This dimension is slightly different than the previous dimension. This dimension relates to whether or not the program offers the same courses multiple times per year. For example, Is a required course offered every term or not? A program may not enforce a strict sequence of courses but still not offer required courses every term.

- (*not flexible if*) “All the cores (*required courses*) aren’t always offered” (M, 34)
- (*not flexible if*) “You miss one (*class*) you have to wait another year” (M, 28)
- “Same classes offered each semester. You don’t have to take a class in a specific term.” (F, 26).

Flexibility in Selecting the Number of Credit Hours Taken per Period

This dimension relates to the ability to take as many or as few credit hours as wanted.

- “A student could choose how many classes each quarter they want to take.” (F, 26)
- “The ability to take as many classes or as few classes as the student desired during the quarter.” (M, 27)
- “If I don’t want to take two courses per period. I don’t have to” (F, 27)
- “Not too many hours in a week” (F, 30)

Flexibility in Selecting the Days and Times Attended

This dimension relates to choosing the days and times that classes are offered.

- “A flexible MBA program would offer courses at various days and times to accommodate a variety of schedules.” (F, 32)
- “Classes offered many different days and times throughout the week.” (M, 26)
- “I can say what days I go to school” (F, 27)

Flexibility in Course Selection

This dimension relates to allowing choice in the courses that are taken.

- “To have the freedom in picking courses in the program.” (M, 31)
- “The choice of classes.” (M, 23)
- “How many classes students have a choice of taking.” (M, 27)
- “Broad base of elective courses and specialization opportunities.” (M, 26)

Flexibility in Delivery Methods

This dimension relates to having options in how the course is delivered.

- “Internet classes. Being able to take classes online.” (M, 26)
- “Offer classes that are 1 week in length or just a few weekends so that people who work can take those classes during their time off.” (F, 23)
- “Some correspondence courses.” (F, 24).

Flexibility in Location

This dimension relates to having multiple locations in which courses can be taken.

- “Multiple sites where class is being offered.” (F, 37)
- “Class locations.” (M, 42)
- “Different campuses where classes can be taken.” (M, 27)

Flexibility in Transferring Credits

This dimension relates to having the option of taking courses at other universities.

- “Flexibility in allowing transfer credits from other universities.” (F, 31)
- “Readily accepting credits from other institutions” (M, 26)

Flexibility in Missing Class

This dimension relates to the ability for students to miss class with little or no negative consequences.

- “That you have the ability to miss a class without being penalized.” (M, 30)
- “To be understanding if students have to be gone every now and then for mandatory work meetings. Allow assignments to be emailed.” (F, 28)
- “Teachers allow absences and work with student to make-up work or tests.” (F, 31)
- “A lighter attendance policy because business people travel for jobs.” (M, 25)

Flexibility in Interacting with Instructors

This dimension relates to students having options when interacting with professors outside of class.

- “Teachers are accessible to students through many forms like Email, work phone, home phone, etc.” (F, 31)
- “The willingness of a professor to meet with you outside of class to review the missed material.” (F, 30)

IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Beyond the importance of recognizing MBA consumers need for flexibility, a primary implication of this study is that flexibility means many things to different people. For example, some people perceive flexible MBA programs as ones that allow them to easily leave and return to the program. Others perceive flexible MBA programs as ones that allow students to determine when they will take required courses.

From a marketing strategy standpoint, it is advantageous for marketers to have a better understanding of the needs of their consumers (Wasmer, Williams and Stevenson, 1997; Kotler and Murphy, 1985). Flexibility has been identified as a potential need in the MBA market. Blackwell, et al. (2001) suggests that marketers *must* understand consumers' needs in order to develop effective marketing strategies. This study helps marketers better understand consumers' need for flexibility and identifies dimensions on which MBA marketers can build flexibility into their programs.

Due to the various meanings of MBA program flexibility, some MBA programs that tout flexibility may not be seen as flexible by the marketplace. For example, a local EMBA program recently advertised as having "increased its flexibility." However, it offers a lock-step program with one program entry start per year, a strict course sequence and set schedules. Obviously, the marketers of this program understand that MBA consumers have a need for flexibility; however, they may not fully understand the various meanings of flexibility within the market. This study sheds light on this issue.

The various meanings of flexibility create interesting issues in terms of consumer satisfaction. Consumer satisfaction is dependent on whether or not the product's perceived performance meets the consumer's expectation (Spreng, MacKenzie and Olshawskiy, 1996; Blackwell, Miniard and Engel, 2001). By emphasizing flexibility, some MBA programs may be elevating consumers' expectation of flexibility but not providing flexibility in the terms that consumers expect. Not satisfying consumers' expectations can be harmful to MBA programs' future success because it may lead to dissatisfaction, which can be especially devastating in a competitiveness marketplace. This study helps marketers better understand the dimensions of flexibility. This understanding will allow them to more strategically manage customers' expectations.

There are many criteria for potential students to utilize when evaluating higher education options in a competitive environment (c.f.e., Coccari and Javalgi, 1995). This paper suggests that, given the increased desire for flexibility in scheduling in the business world (Duff, 2006; Goudreau, 2009; Goldsmith, 2009; Solomon, 2000), flexibility should be viewed by marketers as its own evaluative criterion.

Future research should focus on further understanding the evaluative criterion of flexibility by better understanding on the importance of each of the dimensions of flexibility. For example, is being able to leave the program and return more important in terms of flexibility than being able to schedule courses on different days? Understanding the importance of the various dimensions of flexibility will allow marketers to focus their strategic efforts on the dimensions with the most impact. Not only do marketers need to determine the importance of each dimension of flexibility, but they also need to determine the costs of the various avenues of increasing flexibility. For example, increasing flexibility by offering every course every semester is likely more costly than increasing the flexibility of interacting with instructors. Is this additional expense justified given the additional benefit the student receives? To answer these types of questions, a thorough understanding of both the importance and costs of implementing the various dimensions of flexibility is needed. This understanding will allow marketers to determine the most beneficial, cost-effective strategies for increasing flexibility.

Beyond understanding the costs and benefits of the various dimensions of flexibility, marketers must also better understand how flexibility relates to other evaluative criteria (i.e., price, reputation, location, etc.). For example, what trade-offs do consumers make between the flexibility of the program and the reputation of the program? Future research is needed to better understand these trade-offs.

Future research in this area should also focus on other dimensions of flexibility that this study did not illuminate because as the importance of flexibility increases, it is likely that new forms of flexibility in MBA programs will be implemented due to the competitive nature of the MBA market.

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