

Decision Making of Marketing Students

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Since the customers/products of the university are their students, their decision making process when selecting their majors should be studied. The present research applied a decision process model to investigate how marketing students select their major. A written questionnaire was constructed and sent via mail to all the universities in Puerto Rico that offer a major in marketing (N=19). A total of eight universities send completed questionnaires, making it a sample of 223 marketing majors and 111 non-marketing (business) students that were taking a marketing course. Some of the most outstanding findings were, among others; marketing students perceived marketing as the most prestigious profession and other business students selected accounting (second to marketing students). Most marketing students decide to study marketing at the university level (57%) and only 36% in high school; meaning that they changed majors in university. In another question 54% of them said they had changed majors in the university. Nevertheless 97% said they did not want to change majors again. Why they selected this major, marketing students answered that they did it because they like to be with people. On how they evaluate their professional success they answered quality of life.

The purpose of the investigation was to explore the process of decision making of university marketing students in Puerto Rico when selecting their university major. Variables of the decisional process were identified and studied to evaluate how this process is carried out.

The analysis of the study focused in three aspects: first, to research the decision making of students in their selection of major; second, to compare the decision making of marketing students with other business majors, and finally comparing the decision making process of marketing students in private vs. public universities.

Marketing students should be the most investigated students in the universities. One of the marketing paragons is that “the marketer must try to understand the target market’s needs wants and demands” (Kotler, 2006, p. 24). In marketing one of the most important paradigms is to know how the client makes the purchase decision. Marketing professors should practice what they teach in their classes: investigate the decision making of their clients, in this case, their students (Newell and Titus, 1996). A profile of their decision making process should be at hand. This investigation should be done periodically since each generation of the student body changes due to various influences.

The fluctuations in choosing majors makes more evident the research of this phenomenon, since a decline in marketing students, and business students has been seen in Mayagüez Campus, of the University of Puerto Rico (Profile of Admissions at the Institutions of Superior Education of Puerto Rico 1996-2002, p. 22) and in the United States (Gail, O'Grady and Swanson 1995; Smart, Kelley and Conant, 1999; Schibrowsky, Peltier, and Boyt, 2002).

Fluctuations in these statistics do not respond to the labor market since there are always jobs in related areas to marketing like retail sales, professional sales, advertising agencies, and others. For example; the GNP growth of Puerto Rico was 2.7% in the fiscal year of 2004 while the growth in retail sales was 6.4% (Román, 2004).

Schibrowsky, Peltier, and Boyt (2002), found that recruiting business students in the 1990's was like a roller coaster; it had ups and downs (p. 44). They provide an explanation for this phenomenon. From the competitive point of view, in no other time in history students have had so many educative opportunities to choose from. In addition, there are new nontraditional programs (like courses in line). To make things worse, university business programs are now receiving constant criticism from business leaders for not doing the job of educating with the information and skills necessary to develop business professionals.

Swenson, Swinyard, Langrehr and Smith (1993), carried out a ten-year longitudinal study from 1980 to 1990, finding a declination of students in the field of professional selling. Their conclusion was that professional selling continues losing its attractive, especially among the most intelligent students. (Swenson, et al, 1993, p.8)

Smart, Kelley and Conant (1999), investigated 107 prestigious educators in marketing in the United States of America. These educators indicated that in the 2000's many changes in the discipline are expected. Among others: declination of the marketing popularity, increase of nontraditional students, change of roles in the professors and increase in the public scrutiny.

In addition to marketing students research, it is very important to describe factors that contribute to the decision making of all university students. The findings of the present investigation could be used as a pilot study of the decisional process university students use to choose a specialization. According to Gail, et al (1995), knowing the perception of the students towards their major is valuable information since it provides a perspective about "the health" of the major. This is very important, especially at the moment that the financial appropriations and resources in the universities are diminishing.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The decision process of selecting a career is difficult and important. Kleine (2002), expressed that "when a student selects marketing as a major, he or she is choosing not just to receive the attributes and benefits of the major but also to become something through a process of role identity development (p. 16).

In order to illustrate the parameters of the present investigation a model of decision making was created which includes the different variables to studied. A model is a representation of the reality in order to simplify it.

As a starting point to develop the operational model of marketing students the consumer buying decision model was used. Kotler (2006, p. 191) described it as "marketing scholars have developed a 'stage model' of the buying decision process where the consumer passes through five states: problem recognition, information search, evaluation of the alternatives, purchase decision,

and post purchase behavior”. This five stage model was adapted to explain the decision making process of marketing students when selecting their career.

The first step of any decision process should be what attracted them to the major (Solomon, 1996). Gail, et al (1995, p. 19) found that each specialization ordered its major selection more prestigious than other majors. They also noticed that marketing status, like other majors, can vary with time.

A very important part in the decision making is who influences in the decisions. Newell and Titus (1996), investigated the decision making of students and found that for marketing students, like for their non marketing counterparts, the more important influences in selecting their major were their parents and their university classmates.

As for the reasons to study marketing, Rappu (2004), explored in Australia and New Zealand the reasons the students chose that profession. Some of the reasons were: it provides useful knowledge to run a business, a variety of employment prospects, and reputation of the discipline, flexibility, to be part of family businesses, personal interest, variety of the courses and variety in the careers. Neither age nor gender was found to be significant variables. What they did find was that marketing students took more time selecting their major. Rappu (2004, p. 57) recommends that, since the selection of the marketing major is dynamic, the changes of preferences in the major of the students should be studied periodically.

Luzzo and McWhirter (2001), researched obstacles to finish the university career. Women and minorities anticipated more barriers. The most common barrier was monetary and the one that followed was negative family attitudes. A clear vision of the obstacles and the confidence to overcome them is important to finish the goal: graduation from the university and attaining their career goal.

The students can be visualized like clients, university products, or like partners in the educative endeavor (Clayson and Haley, 2005). No matter how they are perceived, it is very important to investigate how they make their career selection. This would help the university to serve better their needs, to recruit them, and to create new programs. Both, the university and its applicants would know what is expected of them and it would help in the communication and satisfaction of both. The community of superior education would have an idea of how their prospects select their university major and could craft or develop institutional policies accordingly.

Objectives

The main objective of the investigation was to describe variables in the decision making process of university marketing students when selecting a major. A comparison was made with other business (non-marketing) decision making process to discriminate the variables pertaining to marketing students. Another comparison was made between marketing students from private and public universities. From this main objective specific objectives were researched:

- What attracted them to their major
- How important they perceive their career
- Who and what influenced to their career selection
- Where they see themselves working on after graduation
- What obstacles or barriers will obstruct their attainment of their goal
- What personal attributes they perceive in themselves
- What do they perceive as personal success

METHODOLOGY

The Instrument

An instrument was created using the objectives as parameters and validated using three business professors as judges. Then it was given to a group of five graduate students for their comments and observations. The final instrument consisted of 64 items. It included five-point Likert scales (5), one rank order question, four multiple choice, two open questions and six biographical data questions. One open ended question was to write their major and the other one was the last one: further comments.

The instrument was approved by the Committee of Protection of Human Beings in Investigations of the University of Puerto Rico at Mayaguez Campus.

The Population

The questionnaire was administered to seven of the nine courses of marketing that were being offered during First Semester 2005-2006 at the University of Puerto Rico, Mayaguez Campus. The courses ranged from first year courses that have to be taken by all students to upper classman courses. Although the marketing courses had students of diverse majors (Arts, Sciences, Engineering, for example) only the students of the marketing major and of other majors pertaining to business administration were considered.

The second part of this investigation consisted of finding the Puerto Rican universities that offered baccalaureates with marketing majors. The questionnaire was sent via mail to all the department chairman of the universities in Puerto Rico that offer a major in marketing (N=19). Each university received instructions to administer the questionnaire to marketing upper classes (40 questionnaires were sent for each university). A total of seven universities sent completed questionnaires. These were the University of Puerto Rico campuses of Bayamón (39), Arecibo (29) and Aguadilla (39), Metropolitan University (29), Inter-American University Aguadilla Campus (31), University of the Sacred Heart (18) and Catholic University of Ponce (17).

Two universities sent their responses but were not considered in the research because they sent back less than five answered questionnaires.

From the Mayaguez Campus (the bigger sample) a total of 132 answered questionnaires were analyzed, 48 from marketing students and 84 from other business majors. From other universities 202 answered questionnaires were analyzed, 175 were from marketing majors and 27 were non marketing business majors. The total sample then consisted of 223 marketing majors and 111 non-marketing (business) students that were taking a marketing course.

Limitations

Among the limitations of the study, the first one was that the procedure of selection of the participants. This method was unknown since the instrument was sent by mail to the different universities and they selected the course to administer the instrument. Two universities (UPR – Rio Piedras and IAU –San Juan) answered that the instrument had to go through their ethics committee and it seems that it stayed there, since they did not returned them answered.

Another limitation was that the instrument did not provide for students to account for a second major. It is unknown how many of the students in the business sample had marketing as a second major.

RESULTS

Comparing the answers of the students with a marketing major and students with other majors within the faculty of business administration, the total of marketing students who answered the instrument (61%) were women and (39%) men, two students did not answer this question. Marketing students had taken an average of five courses in marketing, (minimum 1, maximum 12) and an average of 28 classes in the university (minimum 1, maximum 70). The average of the general academic index of these students (GPA) was of 3.03 (minimum 2.0, maximum 4.0).

The total of business administration (non-marketing) students that were part of the sample were 111, where 27 (24%) came from accounting, 19 (17%) from human resources, 15 (14%) from industrial management, other 15 (14%) from information systems, 13 from finances (12%), 12 from management (11%), five (5%) from general administration of business, two (2%) from administration of offices and two (2%) sales. Of these 67 (60%) were women and 42 (38%) men, two students did not answer. These students had taken an average of four major courses (minimum one, maximum 15) and an average of 24 courses in the university (minimum one, maximum 51). The general academic index of these students (GPA) in average is of 2.98 (minimum 2.0, maximum 3.94). As a summary, the general profile of all the participants of the study was: the average participant was female, third year students with a GPA of 3.00 (B).

The first question in the instrument was to motivate and interest the students to answer the questionnaire. This question was which major you consider more prestigious. It asked the participant to rank the different business majors by placing number one in the most prestigious, two to the second best and so on. Business (non-marketing) students consider accounting the most prestigious major. On the other hand, marketing students consider their major is more prestigious. Both samples (business and marketing) consider that the majors that have less prestige in society are human resources and information systems.

How they evaluate professional success was the second question. Both samples answered quality of life as the most important aspect. Marketing students considered job security and the importance of their profession in second place. Business students also considered those two aspects; nevertheless the order that they gave them was different. Wealth and possessions constitute in both populations reasons for which they evaluate professional success less.

Using an ANOVA for marketing students responses (Principal Component Analysis) three components were extracted. It seems that quality of life, possessions and wealth were grouped in a first factor. In a second factor was family life and giving something to society and the third factor was other.

Marketing students considered very important their specialization (4.55 from a maximum of 5) to attain their professional success than other business students (4.47). Pertaining to when they decided about their major, most of the students in the sample chose their major in the university (marketing 57%, business 52%), followed by high school (marketing 36%, business 43%).

The main factor that attracted marketing students to their major was that this profession allowed them to be with people. The utility of the knowledge and the creativity in the marketing major were other important factors. The salary was what attracted fewer marketing students. On the other hand, business students were more attracted by the utility of the knowledge. They consider being with people and the freedom to make decisions other important factors.

An ANOVA using Principal Component Analysis with varimax rotation was made for marketing students responses, and three components were extracted. The first component grouped being with people, ease to become a manager, and creativity. The second component was salary; job availability, and reputation. The third component was job security and liberty to take decisions. The students chose more than an option on how they made the decision to select their major. Both samples selected several criteria when they answered how they selected their major (37% marketing, 46% business). The second answer selected was that they ordered their preferences (32% marketing, 30% business).

Where marketing students found information to select his major was asked. They selected other sources not listed in the question. They identified these other sources in a variety of ways like: data they obtained by themselves, the Internet and the counselor at the university. The second option was the school counselor with a 27% for marketing students and a 25% for business students.

What influenced in the selection of their major was the same for both populations. Personal interest and businesses knowledge were the factors that influenced more in the selection of the major. A peculiar data is that although the school counselor was one of the sources that provided more information at the time of selecting their major, it was not identified as one of the main influences. Family business is in last position in both samples but it cannot be concluded that this does not influence their decision making. The instrument did not provide as an alternative "it does not apply" for those students whose families do not own businesses.

An analysis of the factors by the Principal Component Analysis was made and three components were extracted. The first included career reputation, course variety and ease of job hunting (career related). The second included parents, friends and school counselor (person oriented). The third was personal interest, business knowledge and family business.

In what areas they would like to work, it was found that to both populations, would like to own their own business. For marketing students, to work in advertising or public relations are other most selected options. Nevertheless, business (non-marketing) students would consider working in management.

Among the obstacles that could prevent the participants finishing their studies, the number one to both samples was money problems, followed by other reasons. Some of these reasons mentioned by the students were working, pregnancies, the children, and the war of Iraq, among others. Lack of family support was the least of the obstacles for marketing students, lack of friends support is the least for business

It was requested to evaluate what were their attributes. Answers to the question were almost identical in both samples, since they considered personal appearance, self-esteem, interpersonal relations and communication with others, their greater attributes. Both samples answered that the handling of mathematics was their worse attribute. English and time management are other weaknesses for both samples, although there are differences in the order. Some of these weaknesses (math and English) can be taken care of in as remedial courses in the university.

Participants were asked how determined they are to stay in their selected career. It was found that 54% (114) of the marketing students answered that they had changed their major once they were admitted to the university. Of those 28% (32 students) had changed from accounting to marketing, another 17% came from management (19 students), 10% came from biology, the rest was distributed between several majors like are secretarial science, finances, sciences, engineering and information systems among others. On the other hand, 54% business students (59 students) affirmed they had not changed their major. From those business students that

changed their major, one of its previous majors also turned out to be accounting (10%, 5 students), other majors were secretarial sciences, information systems and industrial engineering. A remarkable aspect is that three students of this sample declared to have changed of major three times and another one twice.

Only 3% of marketing students (6 students) mentioned that they were thinking changing their major in the future. Two of the students plan to change from marketing to accounting. Only 7% (8 students) of business (non-marketing) students answered that they were thinking of changing their major. Two of the business students mentioned that they would likely change to marketing.

Analysis of Private vs. Public Universities

Marketing student's responses were analyzed comparing public universities against private universities. The total of marketing students was 223, of which 149 are from public universities and 74 from private universities. Of the public universities students, 97 (65%) were women and 51 are men (34%), one did not answer. These students had taken an average of five marketing courses, (minimum 1, maximum 10) and an average of 29 classes in the university (minimum 1, maximum 70). The average academic index of these students (GPA) is of 3.00 (minimum 2.00 maximum 4.00).

The private universities students that composed this sample was 74, of these 38 (51%) women and 35 (47%) men, a student did not answer. These students took an average of six major courses (minimum two, maximum 12) and an average of 27 courses in the university (minimum two, maximum 48). The academic index of these students (GPA) in average is of 3.10 (minimum 2.00 maximum 4.00).

It was found that, in general, marketing students of public and private universities consider marketing the most prestigious major, followed by accounting and finances. Emphasis on the differences between the two sectors will be analyzed.

Students of the public universities consider that job security is one of the best measures to evaluate professional success, followed by quality of life and importance of the profession. In private universities quality of life was the most important, followed by the importance of the profession and job security. This could be due to the present situation of the country, the economy, in addition to the system of values of this generation.

Students of public universities declared that they would like to work in their own business or the area of advertising, the students of private universities chose the same alternatives, nevertheless inverted the order.

It is important to emphasize that private university students evaluate themselves better than students from public universities with respect to the self-esteem.

In public universities the tendency of marketing students to change majors is greater (56%) than in private universities. On the other hand, half of marketing students in private universities declared to have changed to marketing after entering the university, other half had not changed majors. It should be reminded that private universities are much more expensive than private universities.

CONCLUSIONS

The general profile of the participants of the study were female, third year students with an average of 3.00 (B). It is about the same as the profile of business students in Puerto Rico.

Marketing students selected their major as the most prestigious. Gail, et al (1995, p. 19) found that each specialization ordered its selection more prestigious than the others and they called it the ethnocentric perspective. This was confirmed in the present investigation. Nevertheless, non marketing student found marketing one of the least prestigious (accounting being the first). Ferrell and Gonzalez (2004) investigated students attending the first day of a marketing course and found they thought that marketing is a “poor career choice” and marketing was a “bad business activity”. These perceptions need to be changed and could explain the findings on the present investigation.

Professional success was rated as quality of life. Nevertheless, it is associated with possessions and wealth. It seems that the three of them combined makes the whole picture.

O’ Brien and Deans (1995) found in England that the main reason for selecting marketing as a major was that they had good job prospects. It was followed by the flexibility to combine it with other majors, being accounting and economy the popular ones. Flexibility as a reason to study marketing also was found in the study of Rappu (2004) in Australia and New Zealand. This item was not asked in the present research and marketing majors answered that being with people was the most important aspect for the selection of their major. This factor was related to creativity and managerial aspirations in analysis of the components. It seems that being with people and creativity are the factors that attract these students.

Rappu (2004) found that non marketing majors were known to choose their business majors earlier in their undergraduate degree years compared with marketing majors. The present investigation found marketing and business students deciding their major in the university (57 and 52% respectively).

The option of other brought some difficulties. In finding information about their career, marketing students preferred the option of other. Under this category they explained a multitude of sources such as internet which was not in the list of options. School counselor was the second option chosen. It is interesting to note that they changed majors in the university, so the counselor must have played some role in the change.

They selected as obstacles that could prevent them from finishing their career were money problems and the other option. This option of other brought about a multitude of responses and should be investigated more. Previous research (Luzzo and McWhirter, 2001) found that family problems were the second barrier after money problems. This was not found in the present research.

The factor that attracted most marketing students to their profession was, to be with people. This selection, added to their own evaluation of themselves: good appearance and self-esteem, and their choice of careers: advertising; seems to be linked. Anyhow being with people is very important in the marketing profession, especially in sales and client satisfaction. This finding is parallel to what Newell and Titus (1996) found. They concluded that “marketing students perceived their greatest strengths to be leadership and interpersonal/relational abilities, suggesting that they view themselves as ‘leaders handlers of people’” (p. 61). Strasser, Ozgur and Shroeder (2002) noticed that marketing was correlated with interpersonal skills, as sophomores advance and determine that their personal skills are more important to a career; they may lean toward marketing (p. 46).

Marketing students considered their weakness math and English, these can be provided for by remedial courses in the university. This should be a flag to attend to by university administrators. On the other hand, O Brien, Deans and Kenneth found that the industry rated marketing graduates in UK as deficient in problem solving, financial perspectives, leadership and

communication skills. Research should be done from the industry perspective of what are the necessary skills for marketing professionals in Puerto Rico

The most significant issue in the present research is, when marketing students selected their major. It seems that they selected their major when they were already in the university. Marketing is the invisible discipline. People know how they buy their product but they did not know the marketing efforts that were involved in that sale. This does not happen in accounting and human resources. It is inherent in the discipline that it is not visible to lay people. Maybe that is why marketing students selected their major in the university. High school students should be researched to find out the perceptions they have of marketing and how they are going to choose their major. They usually think of the traditional majors like biology and engineer and end up in marketing, selling medical and technical equipment. Maybe some marketing should be done in this level (high school) to the marketing discipline (West, Newell and Titus, 2001), especially to selling. Swenson et al. (1993) found that “personal selling careers continue to lose attractiveness, especially among the most capable students” (p. 59). Major selection then is unconnected to the job market since usually there are plenty of jobs available in selling and other marketing fields.

FURTHER RESEARCH

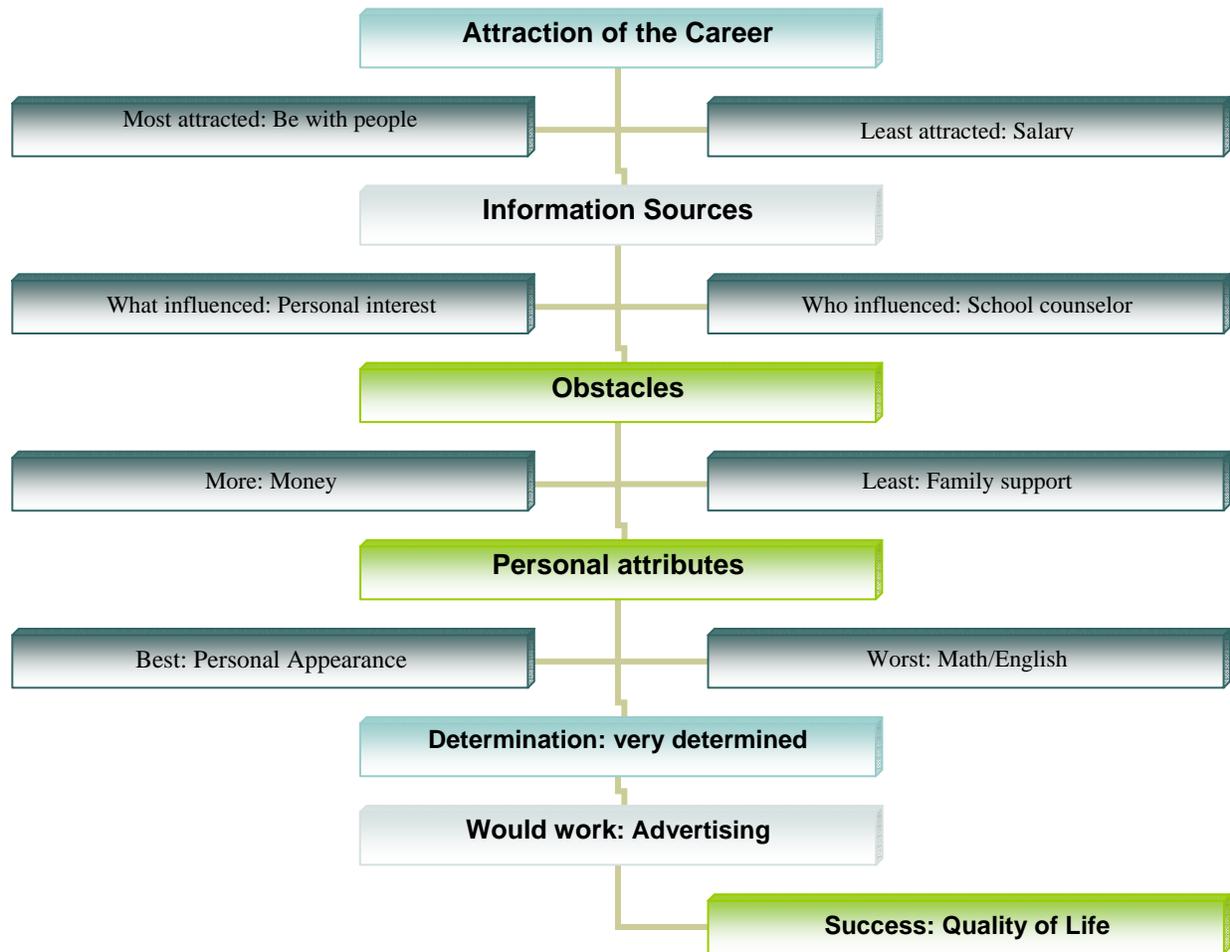
Research should be done in high school students. Some of the areas of the research could be their decision process of selecting a university major. More specifically they should be asked how they define and perceive marketing to corroborate their (lack of?) understanding of the discipline

At the other end, research should be done in the industry. How practitioners rate the abilities needed to work in marketing, what obstacles they encountered in their career, and other related variables could construct a complete picture.

In marketing major students, research should be done in how they identify themselves with their major, and how they visualize themselves working as marketing professionals. Kleine (2002) recommends some strategies for enhancing student’s role identity as marketing majors.

University students should be researched in their decision process and how they perceive themselves working in their profession. Universities should periodically research their students/ clients/ products because each new generation changes values and perceptions. Kleine (2002) stated that “students are not with us to receive benefits, they are here to be and become something-to make connections and built their identities” (p. 25). How the university accomplishes this, should be researched.

Illustration I Final Decision Making Model of Marketing Students



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