

AN EMPIRICAL ASSESSMENT OF EDUCATOR AND PRACTITIONER PERCEPTIONS: IMPLICATIONS FOR MARKETING RESEARCH EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Thirty marketing-related topic areas were evaluated by marketing research (MR) educators and practitioners to determine their perceived importance in preparing graduate students interested in MR careers. The results

within and between groups suggested that several traditional subject areas are perceived as most important from the perspectives of both educators and practitioners; other topics were rated lower than expected.

INTRODUCTION

In 1980 the first Master of Marketing Research program was launched to "satisfy the needs of business for skilled marketing research (MR) professionals" (Reynolds 1981). Since that time, a few other universities have developed similar programs, and there are at least three reasons that suggest a proliferation of such programs in the future. First, the demand for qualified MR professionals has grown over the past 20 years and continues to grow (Honomichl 1990; Hupp and Redington 1990). Recent projections show no expected dampening of this growth trend (White 1989; Occupational Outlook Handbook 1992-93, p 109). Second, professional MR certification has emerged as a "hot" topic within the past few years, suggesting that a sizeable market may soon emerge that needs to acquire training/education to maintain/augment its professional status (Stern and Crawford 1986). Together with the AMA, MR practitioners and educators have begun groundwork for certification (Schlossberg 1991; Steinberg 1992). Third, an apparent oversupply of entry level management generalists may cause many graduate schools to "gravitate toward market niches, producing specialists to meet specific customers' needs" (Linden et. al. 1992).

A major concern for administrators of existing specialized MR programs and for the initiators of new programs is curriculum design. Current administrators of successful programs need to monitor program effectiveness within a very dynamic environment. New program developers

must design an educational offering that will have the best chance of successfully meeting the needs of the practitioner marketplace, the student, and the educational institution. In either case, information from practitioners, students (past, current, or prospective) and faculty can be quite valuable in the design or re-design of such curricula.

Most studies that have addressed needs satisfaction in the context of graduate MR education approach the issue exclusively from the practitioner's perspective (c.f., Bellenger et.al. 1990; John and Needel 1989; Reynolds 1981; Segal 1987. There are two exceptions, both of which obtained practitioner and educator input: Miller (1967) where the focus was quite broad (The study examined students' need to take courses in categories such as Business, Mathematics, and Sociology) and Anderson (1982) where the scope was limited (respondents prioritized "text book chapter topics" regarding data collection and analysis techniques).

The existing literature provides little guidance to assess the differences of perspectives of any of the three stakeholders (i.e., students, practitioners, and educators) regarding subject matter or topic importance. Certainly, one could perform static comparisons of the results from separate studies, however, observed differences could be an artifact of design variation, topic selection, temporal factors, and so forth. The objective of this study was to address some of these shortcomings. Specifically, the purposes were to . . .

- Determine the importance of such course topics in satisfying the needs of graduate students who desire a career in MR *from the perspective of MR educators*.
- Determine the importance of such course topics in satisfying the needs of graduate students who desire a career in MR *from the perspective of MR practitioners*.
- Compare perceived importance of the course topics ratings between *practitioners and educators*.
- Interpret the findings and assess implications regarding curriculum design.

THE STUDY

Two separate random samples were chosen. A sample of 467 marketing faculty and chairpersons with a self-reported interest in MR was chosen from a sampling frame developed by coordinating a list of AACSB accredited business schools and American Marketing Association directory. The AMA directory provided information on marketing faculty, their titles, their university affiliation, and their specific area of interest (e.g. marketing research). A sample of 1,000 MR practitioners was also randomly selected. The latter sample consisted of 500 MR professionals who were employed by a marketing research supplier and 500 MR professionals employed by firms with in-house MR departments. The number of usable questionnaires was 191 and 297 from the educator and practitioner samples, respectively.

RESULTS

Sample Characteristics

Seventy-eight percent of the educator-respondents represented public institutions, 22% private schools. On average, respondents had over 12 years of teaching and 11 years of practical marketing research experience. A typical respondent had also published over four marketing research-related articles in the past five years. A large majority (71%) of respondents indicated marketing research as their primary area of teaching interest, thus assuring that they were knowledgeable about the field of inquiry. The sample of practitioners was equally represented by in-house staff professionals (52%) and external supplier or consulting professionals (49%). Fifty seven percent were male, 43% female. Educationally, twelve percent of the respondents held a Ph.D. degree,

57% a masters degree, 30% possessed only a four-year degree. Of those who had earned a masters degree 68% indicated it to be an MBA. Respondents averaged 14.1 years of experience in the MR industry. Forty eight percent of the sample reported being in top/upper management, 34%, middle management, 15% research analysts and lower management.

Importance of Marketing Research Topics - Educators

Five topics received average importance ratings of above 6.0 (7-point scale): Marketing Research (6.6); MR Design and Data Collection (6.4); MR Project (6.4); MR Data Analysis and Reporting (6.2); and Multivariate Data Analysis (6.1). Thus, it appears that from an academic perspective, any graduate program in MR should, at the bare minimum, cover these five areas. Six other topics received mean importance ratings of 5.5 and greater: Measurement of Marketing Effectiveness (5.7); Practical Experience/Internship (5.7); Sample Survey (5.6); Field Research (5.6); Experimental Designs (5.5); and Analysis of Commercial Databases (5.5). It is clear from these evaluations that marketing academicians view these topics as important for MR graduate students. Given the nature of these topics and their mean importance ratings one can infer that these subject areas should be required of students pursuing an advanced degree to prepare them for a professional career in MR. It is interesting to note that academicians attach such high importance to practical experience/internship programs. Furthermore, the high importance given to the subject area of Commercial Databases is indicative of its practical usefulness to the research industry and its recent discussion in academic literature. Topics which received moderate importance ratings between 5.0 and 5.4 might be considered as electives for marketing research students in an advanced degree program. These topics include: Consumer Behavior (5.4); Creative Problem Solving (5.4); Categorical Data Analysis (5.4); Non-parametric Statistics (5.4); Strategic Marketing (5.2); Quantitative Forecasting Models (5.1); and Syn-dicated Research (5.0).

Importance of Marketing Research Topics - Practitioners

Seven topics received average importance ratings of approximately 6.0 and greater: MR

Data Analysis and Reporting (6.5); MR Design and Data Collection (6.4); Marketing Research (6.4); MR Project (6.4); Practical Experience/ Internship (6.3); Creative Problem Solving (6.0); and Consumer Behavior (6.0). From practitioners' perspective, these topics constitute the most essential part of a graduate program in making research. Four topics received mean importance ratings of 5.5 and greater: Measurement of Marketing Effectiveness (5.7); Multivariate Data Analysis (5.7); Sample Surveys (5.7); and Strategic Marketing (5.5). From the practitioners' perspective these subject areas are considered critical for graduate education in marketing research. This may be an indication of how role of marketing research in the 1990s has become an integral part of strategic planning and marketing management for many business organizations. Topics that received moderate importance ratings (between 5.0 and 5.4) from practitioners were: Product Management (5.4); Experimental Design (5.3); Categorical Data Analysis (5.3); Field Research (5.1); Quantitative Forecasting Models (5.0); Syndicated Research (5.0); Commercial Database Analysis (5.0); and Computer-Information Systems (5.0). As with the educators' group, many traditional marketing topics (e.g., promotion, distribution) did not receive high ratings from practitioners. A clear exception was product management.

Comparative Analysis

There was much similarity between educators' and practitioners' importance ratings for most marketing research topics. However, some individual items reflected marked differences. Practitioners attach far greater importance to the following MR topics: Product Management, Practical Experience/Internship, Consumer Behavior, and Creative Problem Solving. These differences are not totally unexpected. Professional researchers recognize that a great deal of MR is conducted when developing new offerings and managing existing ones. Similarly, practitioners would be expected to assign a greater importance to internship/practical experience aspects of a graduate program in MR. However, that such topics as consumer behavior and creative problem solving received relatively higher ratings from practitioners is a bit surprising. Perhaps, this reflects a prevailing background deficiency in these areas among entry level MR professionals. On the other hand, compared to practitioners, MR educators attach far greater importance

to the MR topics of: Commercial Database Analysis, Nonparametric Statistics, and Field Research. This may indicate areas where educators feel their students are ill-prepared, while practitioners envision such areas as being developed "on the job" through experience. Overall, however, there appears to be a far more consistency in the evaluative ratings of MR educators and practitioners than there are differences.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Both practitioners and educators placed emphasis on the importance of all seven "traditional" MR topics. Five of these topic areas are among those typically addressed in most MR courses/textbooks (i.e., MR, MR Design and Data Collection, MR Data Analysis and Reporting, Sample Surveys, and Field Research). That three of these areas received very high mean ratings from both groups suggests that graduate MR programs include each as a topic for a separate required course. For example, the program could require a three course sequence beginning with a general MR course, followed by an in-depth research design/data collection procedures course, and then by a course on analysis and communicating results. However, an academic treatment of MR subject matter should be practice driven. The remain two topics, "practical experience/internship" and "marketing project" received high ratings from both groups, suggesting that such curricula should ensure that students get strong exposure to active learning and other practical applications of their developing skills. There are several alternatives to consider to achieve such an objective. Students can be required to design research proposals with "real world" participants in several or all required MR related courses. For at least one proposal, an entire study including data collection, analysis and presentation must be performed. This paper may be incorporated as a type of "graduate program thesis" for which the student assembles a committee of faculty members and/or practitioners to oversee the project. In addition, practical experience through internship should be strongly considered as part of such curricula. Collectively, this will ensure that students are exposed to the core body of MR knowledge and enhance their ability to apply it.

Clearly MR students must be exposed to the core body of knowledge in the field, but such

knowledge must be linked to the managerial/strategic aspects of marketing in general. This view was reflected by both groups of respondents as revealed within the set of 'general marketing' topics. While four of these topic areas obtained modest mean ratings (i.e., distribution, promotion, international, and marketing policies) four others were rated much more strongly, especially by practitioners (i.e., Consumer Behavior, Strategic Marketing, Creative Problem Solving, Product Management). As such, consideration should be given to requiring a graduate Consumer Behavior course in a graduate MR program, since the topic is not likely covered effectively in other courses. A similar argument can be made for a course in Strategic Marketing and in Creative Problem Solving, although for the latter, such a topic might be effectively integrated into other courses by performing case analysis, actual marketing audits, or marketing plan projects. Interestingly, "Product Management" was perceived as being more essential by practitioners than by educators and may be explained by the fact that much commercial MR is product/service driven. And, while this linkage is obvious to the practitioner, it may be less so to academicians. Accordingly, a separate course in Product/Service Management (including exposure to the development of new offerings) should be seriously considered as an integral part of any graduate MR curriculum. Relatively low mean ratings associated with distribution, promotion, international marketing, and marketing policies, signal that such topics may only be useful for students who do not have undergraduate marketing backgrounds, unless they have interest in a specific application area for their MR degree. Further, in light of the growing trends toward business globalization coupled with increases in international MR activities, greater emphasis on "international" type courses might be justified in the very near future.

Both practitioners and educators expressed the importance of topics that foster the development of an MR student's "quantitative and statistical" skills. Areas deemed most important by both groups were: Multivariate Data Analysis, Experimental Design, Categorical Data Analysis, Quantitative Forecasting Models, and Non-Parametric Statistics. Given the specifically high ratings for the Multivariate Analysis topic, such a course should be offered as a core course in graduate MR curriculum, while the others warrant strong consideration as areas that should

be covered and integrated into the curriculum. Finally, of the remaining topics, three received relatively strong mean ratings (Syndicated Research, Commercial Databases Analysis, and Measuring Marketing Effectiveness). Two key trends within the MR industry offer validity to this finding. First, there has been a growing widespread usage of secondary data by marketing researchers, spurred primarily by advances in computer and telecommunication technology. Second, one of the fastest growing applications of research services has been in the area of customer satisfaction and quality measurement. Two potential recommendations surface. One, respondents may be suggesting that "in general" graduate MR students should be exposed to contemporary "specialized applied" areas. If this is the case, it seems to argue for a type of seminar series or a type of "special topics" course consisting of, perhaps, three selected topics that may vary from one course offering to the next. Two, respondents may be specifically suggesting that the three topics, Measuring Market Effectiveness, Commercial Data Bases, and Syndicated Research be formally addressed in the program. If so, it seems conceivable that a single course could be developed to focus on the latter two topics and may be broadened to include other secondary data sources. The topic on measuring market effectiveness seems quite narrow to consider as separate course offering and may need to be addressed as a major component of some other course.

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