

# EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AND CONSUMER BEHAVIOR: AN EXERCISE IN CONSUMER DECISION MAKING

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## ABSTRACT

*Experiential learning activities are a product of the paradigm shift away from simple dissemination of knowledge toward the production of learning. This shift in thinking requires marketing educators to develop and implement activities that allow students to experience the curriculum in order to prepare them for life outside of the classroom. Overall, this is a grand scale endeavor, but simple activities that illustrate individual marketing concepts can heed major progress in teaching students to think. Consumer behavior is an important part of the marketing curriculum, and understanding the processes that consumers employ when making decisions is a major part of the consumer behavior content. This paper describes a straightforward pedagogical tool that can be used in Principles of Marketing or Consumer Behavior --or any courses where teaching decision making is necessary. The process and preparation for implementing this classroom based experiential learning technique are described in detailed.*

I am always ready to learn although I do not always like being taught. ~Winston Churchill

## EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

As the words of Churchill so eloquently allude, teaching is a task often met with some resistance – not toward the outcome of learning but toward the process of being taught. Because of this contempt, many scholars have suggested a paradigm shift in the world of higher education from an “instruction paradigm” to a “learning paradigm” (Barr and Tagg 1995; Saunders 1997). In the instruction paradigm instructors and students are viewed as givers and recipients of knowledge – students are taught. But within the learning paradigm the focus is on an educational environment that offers students the opportunity to actively participate in their learning experience – students learn.

Experiential learning activities are a product of the paradigm shift away from simple dissemination of knowledge toward the production of learning. Kolb (1984) defines experiential learning as a “process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (p. 38). Embracing this “process” may be key in preparing students for life outside of the classroom. Ferrell and Gonzalez (2004) noted that students possess a limited view of marketing that can only be overcome by enabling students to experience the various activities and elements of marketing through exercises, cases, and other activities that relate marketing to the students’ knowledge base and past experiences. With experiential activities, instructors can create a more effective educational device that blends discovery and relevance (Goretsky 1984). Ultimately, experiential learning solves the problem with which

Churchill was confronted by allowing students to learn without being “taught.”

Research has confirmed that class activities that create an experience enhance student learning by increasing students’ involvement in the learning process (Morgan et al. 1987; Slavin 1980), heightening instructor and student enthusiasm (Dabbour 1997), improving student performance on graded assignments (Perry et al. 1996), increasing student enjoyment (Lawson 1995) and perceived value of the learning experience (Graeff 1997) and developing student confidence and competence (Pollack and Lilly 2008).

## EXPERIENTIAL ACTIVITY FOR CONSUMER DECISION MAKING

Consumer behavior is an important part of the marketing curriculum, and understanding the processes that consumers employ when making decisions is a major part of the consumer behavior content, with some texts devoting as many as six chapters to knowledge of the process (Hawkins, Best, and Coney 2004). Despite its importance, there are limited shared resources detailing experiential exercises that can be used to help students comprehend the logical and psychological processes involved in consumer decision making.

In most marketing and psychology classrooms alike explanation of decision making processes has been restricted to the instructor paradigm of lecture-based instruction, yet a relatively simple activity can be used to illustrate the steps in the process and how decisions are

made. This activity follows a five-stage model of decision making from need recognition to information search, evaluation of alternative, choice and post choice evaluation illustrating important concepts like the consideration set, and decision rules along the way.

This paper describes a straightforward pedagogical tool that can be used in Principles of Marketing or Consumer Behavior --or any courses where teaching decision making is necessary-- as long as enough time is allotted to introduce the concepts prior to participation. Students are given the opportunity to actually make decisions and reflect on the steps involved along the way. This makes a concept that on paper seems purely psychological appear relevant to their daily lives and demonstrates why marketers need to be aware of how consumers make decisions. The exercise is relatively brief taking about 40–50 minutes of class time including follow-up and requires only minimal preparation.

This particular exercise was developed around a Consumer Behavior text (Babin and Harris 2008), but the terminology can easily be adapted to any decision making framework by changing given terminology and language. It is a two-step approach that allows the students to experience two very different consumer decisions. The decision making framework used in the exercise contends that in high involvement situations consumers make decision following 5 steps (1) need recognition, (2) Information search (which ultimately leads to a set of alternatives), (3) Evaluation of alternatives, (4) choice, and (5) post-purchase behavior. This activity focuses primarily on steps 2-4 of this process. Specifically the pedagogical goals of the exercise are to reinforce the following concepts:

- ◆ The different types of information search and their use in different situations.
- ◆ The concepts of consideration set, inept set, and inert set.
- ◆ The purpose and importance of evaluative criteria.
- ◆ The difference between hedonic and utilitarian criteria.
- ◆ How consumers use the 5 major decision rules.

This exercise is used after the steps of the decision process have been discussed. Students are given the opportunity to apply concepts that they have been taught, and it usually helps students put all of the pieces together.

The premise of the exercise is that students are told that they have recognized the need for a piece of candy. Thus, to prepare for the activity, it is necessary to purchase a variety of choice options for the students. In order to best illustrate the concepts, it is important to provide a wide selection. This includes chocolate candies and confectionaries and candies of different sizes. Providing 6–10 options will allow students more criteria to consider. For example, I have used candy that included fun sized Snickers, Milk Duds and Butterfinger, bite size Milky Way and

Reese's, fun sized Skittles, individual Starbursts, Tootsie Roll Pops, Dum Dum Suckers, and Double Bubble bubblegum. Varying the size and type of candy provides different benefits for students to consider (i.e., my favorite candy is Reese's, but the Snickers is bigger).

The next step in the preparation is for the second part of the exercise where groups of students are directed to buy candy for some function. It is necessary to remove the candy from the bags, count it, and then record the pieces per bag along with the price of the candy (it is convenient to do so on the bag). A worksheet containing relevant questions should be prepared prior to class (See the Appendices for examples).

## **PART 1: AN INDIVIDUAL DECISION**

Part one of the activity is completed by each individual student. The containers of candy are placed across the room at available areas. Students have been given directions that they have recognized the need for a piece of candy and may choose just one. They are then instructed to browse the options and make a decision after which they will answer a set of questions about that decision. Students will fulfill this need in various ways – most of which can be used to illustrate real consumer behavior. Appendix A includes the questions that students are expected to answer for this part of the activity.

Although this activity is based on the students interacting with the exercise to build on their existing experiences and build new knowledge, the instructor is a vital partner in the production process. Each student will have individual responses, but only by synthesizing these individual realizations will students see a full picture of consumer behavior. This means that the instructor should carefully observe student behaviors in order to facilitate a productive class discussion. The first concept that is covered in the discussion is information search. When asked what type of search that they employed, most students will cite internal search since they were familiar with the candies and used their past experience to choose one. This is an important point to build from in the second half of the activity. It is also an easy question to ask to get students ready to participate.

The next important step in the discussion is to explain the consideration set. Students have already answered that question on the hand out and many of them will assume that the consideration set is all of the objects available to them. You can ask a question to prime the correct response like “is anyone allergic to chocolate” or “does anyone dislike chocolate?” Inevitably, someone will raise a hand or nod at this statement. The idea of not liking something is very clear for students and when you ask, “what is your consideration set if you are allergic to or do not like chocolate,” they can make the connection and eliminate the chocolate options from consideration. The next step in the discussion is to build off of that point and ask what the

inept set would be for someone who is allergic to or does not like chocolate. The students usually have a very good grasp on these two concepts after the discussion.

The final part of this part of the exercise is to discuss what evaluative criteria were used. You can ask students what attributes they considered when reviewing their alternatives. Many logical answers will come up like, the best taste, or size, or the presence or absence of a specific ingredient (caramel, peanut butter, chocolate, etc.). You can mention other potential criteria like color or name. Usually during the decision making activity, I observe some students choosing the candy closest to them. When you begin to discuss the activity you may question a student who has used this strategy as to why she/he chose his or her candy. She/he will usually laugh and say because I didn't have to get up out of my chair! This response illustrates that convenience can also be an important evaluative criteria.

## **PART 2: A GROUP DECISION**

For the second part of the activity, students are divided into small groups. Within the group they are given a task for which they need to buy candy. It is convenient if the activity falls around Halloween since the task can easily be related to trick or treating. Students are advised: "assume that your group needs to purchase candy for \_\_\_\_\_ (a party, Halloween, etc.). You will be using your own money to buy the candy and you need enough for 100 kids. You want all the kids to get the same thing. As a group, decide which candy you will purchase." For this exercise, students use the original candy bags which contain information about how many pieces of candy are in each bag and how much each bag of candy costs.

As a group, students answer some questions very similar to the ones in the previous exercise. They are then responsible for filling out a table that illustrates decision rules. They are asked to list 5 specific product attributes, rank each attribute for importance, list the consideration set for the decision (at least 4 products), rank each item in the consideration set on each attribute and discover what their choice would have been using each decision rule. The table often seems intimidating to the students who believe that they are being asked to do complex math! It is important to take some time when groups get to the decision rules to explain them in detail and to spend some time with each individual group reiterating the concept. The specific questions presented to the students along with the table used for this activity are outlined in Appendix B.

In discussing the activity, you have a chance to differentiate internal and external search because rather than relying on their memory, students needed to consult the information on the bag and to solicit information from the other people in the group. It also reviews the concepts

of consideration set and evaluative criteria. When discussing the table, you can start out by asking what the important attributes were (consideration sets will differ by group). You can remind students that these attributes are the evaluative criteria, and you have a chance to differentiate between hedonic and utilitarian criteria. Things like price and number of pieces of candy are the most obvious and the first to come out, but students also recognize other risks involved in providing candy – things like how cool the kids will think they are. Since the age of the children was not provided, safety becomes an issue for some students (bubblegum may not be appropriate for small children, etc.). Other groups may say that it needs to be a candy that they like, so that they can eat it if there is any left! Size and color of the package, the absence or presence of specific ingredients, and brand perceptions will also come up during this stage of the discussion.

The majority of the discussion related to the table should have been done in the small groups. It is often necessary to re-explain each type of decision rule (conjunctive, disjunctive, lexicographic, elimination-by-aspects) to each group once they have the table filled out because it often does not make sense until the numbers are in front of them. Students also figure out that sometimes consumers have to employ multiple decision rules since the conjunctive and disjunctive rules may only narrow down the potential choices. It is most useful to help students draw these conclusions in the small groups and allow them to share their insights in the larger group discussion.

What often comes out in the discussion is that many of the groups had one dominant attribute that guided their actual decision making (price or cost per candy are popular). This allows for a discussion of the lexicographic decision rule and gives the opportunity to illustrate that decision making is sometimes as simple as choosing the option that performs best on a given attribute – but it is still a process. I often ask "if a consumer is making a decision using a lexicographic decision rule what does that mean for marketers?" Students usually require some additional priming, but eventually, as a class, we determine that marketers either need to know what attribute(s) that consumers are using for decision making so that they can respond to that in their messages, or they need to influence what attributes consumers see as important. This is a good review of the concepts relating to attitude and attitude change and a practical application of how consumer decision making affects marketing managers.

## **DISCUSSION**

This article enhances the existing body of knowledge by providing a specific suggestion on how one particular experiential learning activity might be integrated into marketing courses. Overall, this exercise is extremely successful in engaging students in the decision making

process and illustrating key concepts. Although initially overwhelmed by the terminology and tables in the book relating to decision rules, by the time class is complete, they have a working understanding of the concepts.

The response from students was overwhelmingly positive. What seems like just another set of steps to memorize becomes something relevant to daily life. Students are able to see the difference in internal and external information search, identify the consideration set and evaluative criteria, and implement decision rules. In addition, the instructor's interaction in the scenario, careful observing behaviors that can be used to illustrate a variety of concepts makes the activity both educational and fun for the students. These observed outcomes help meet the challenge of producing activities that meet students' desires for an interactive, interesting, and enjoyable class (Ferrell and Gonzalez 2004).

### CONCLUSION

Classroom-based experiential learning techniques have been shown to increase the amount of definitional knowledge acquired by students, but more importantly, these activities have also been linked to improvements in higher-order knowledge (Hamer 2008). This indicates

that encouraging students to use course materials in loosely defined situations that are similar better prepares them for the situations that they will encounter when entering a work environment that demands an array of skill including oral and written communication, critical thinking, and teamwork (Floyd and Gordon 1998).

Business instruction is, at its root, vocational education. As such, instructors should work in the classroom, to prepare students for the challenges that they will face within their occupational spheres. Although the learning paradigm via experiential activities has a confirmed influence on classroom and learning outcomes, the impact of these types of activities reaches farther than that. Experiential learning does allow students to participate in the learning process as they logically discuss marketing concepts and develop a better understanding of the relevance of the material, but the true contribution of experiential learning is that students are forced outside the comfort zone of memorizing and reciting facts and are expected to actually think. It is these critical thinking skills that will ultimately serve them in their career paths. Instructors should embrace every chance to develop these skills in their students by building a library of experiential learning activities that can become a shared resource.

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**APPENDIX A: PART 1 DIRECTIONS AND QUESTIONS**

You have recognized a need for a piece of candy. You may only choose one. Please browse your options And make a decision.

1. Which candy did you choose?
2. What type of search did you employ? What information did you gather?
3. What was your consideration set?
4. Were any of the items in your inept set? Why?
5. What evaluative criteria did you use when making your decision? Label each as hedonic or utilitarian.

**APPENDIX B: PART 2 DIRECTIONS AND QUESTIONS**

Now, assume that your group needs to purchase Halloween candy for trick-or-treaters. You will be using your own money to buy the candy, and you need enough for 100 kids. You want all the kids to get the same thing. As a group, decide which candy you will purchase.

1. Which candy did you choose?
2. What type of search did you employ? What information did you gather?
3. What was your consideration set?
4. What evaluative criteria did you use when making your decision?
5. Were there factors that influenced which criteria that you chose?

Now, think about that the attributes that you did or could have used in making your group decision. List 5 attributes.

1. Rank each attribute in importance.
2. Rank each item in your consideration set on each attribute.
3. Using each of the four decision rules, determine which item you would choose and explain why.

1. Conjunctive
2. Disjunctive
3. Lexicographic
4. EBA
5. How do these choices differ from a compensatory model?

Attribute	Importance					

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