

# THE UNDERGRADUATE CAPSTONE MARKETING COURSE: OBJECTIVES, CONTENT, AND PEDAGOGY

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## ABSTRACT

*The paper discusses the results of a comprehensive review of 122 capstone marketing syllabi collected from across the United States. Using content-analysis, the syllabi were reviewed for learning objectives, topical coverage, and pedagogical methods. Not surprisingly, the course goes by an extensive listing of course names, with a wide variety of textbooks and reading material. Overarching course objectives were to better understand marketing strategy concepts in general and, more specifically, the integration of marketing concepts learned in prior courses. The majority of syllabi are structured around the traditional marketing mix framework, and instruction appears to be somewhat consistent across classrooms.*

## INTRODUCTION

Many, if not most, undergraduate programs in marketing require a capstone course for its students (Butler and Straughn-Mizerski 1998). This capstone course brings together knowledge gained from a variety of required and elective marketing classes (Bussie're 2005). Over the years, several educators have attempted to better understand variations in teaching this capstone course. Hensel and Marshall (1998) assembled a panel of six experts to provide their perspectives and reassessment of the capstone course, with a major focus on the "what," or content, of the capstone course. Lamb et al. (2001a and 2001b) focused primarily upon the "how," or pedagogy, in the capstone course, with a review of methods such as written cases, live cases, experiential exercises, and consulting projects. The goal of the current research was to provide a comprehensive synthesis of the marketing capstone course by assessing what is actually done in the course via a content analysis of capstone marketing course syllabi.

The paper is organized as follows. The next section provides an overview of the marketing capstone course. A description of the methodology used in collecting and synthesizing course syllabi is then presented. The next section focuses upon the results of the syllabi assessment. The paper then ends with a brief summary highlighting the coalescence around the traditional marketing mix as a guiding framework for the capstone course and with ideas for future research in this area.

## PERSPECTIVES AND PRACTICES IN THE CAPSTONE COURSE

Dudley and Marlow (2005) refer to four major types of assessment tools in marketing education: tests,

portfolios, surveys, and the capstone course. An extensive review of the marketing education literature, however, suggested a dearth of knowledge-sharing with respect to the overall composition of the capstone marketing course. While there are numerous articles that describe particular projects, techniques, or topics appropriate for the class, there are few broad-based overviews pertaining to the course and what it does. Bussière (2005) notes that marketing capstone courses vary by university and have different names (e.g., marketing management, marketing strategy, marketing policy) but that there are some overall consistencies across courses: (1) the major theme is the interaction between the customer and the firm, referred to as high-level decisions in the syllabi, (2) the use of strategic marketing frameworks allow discussion of customers, competition, and the environment, (3) the course is organized around the marketing mix (traditional four P's plus people, physical evidence, and process), and (4) the course is taught by multiple methods.

Robideaux and Good (2001) suggested that marketing educators utilize various teaching methodologies/tools to assist students in learning marketing content but that content knowledge is the basic premise of marketing education. Essentially, what is taught is a critical question for assessment (cf., Calder and Tybout 1999). Schibrowsky, Peltier, and Boyt (2002, p. 50) expand this notion by suggesting that professional marketing education programs must, "... provide their students with the theoretical foundations of marketing and also develop the practical skills needed to be successful in marketing. . . ." Ultimately, it appears that course/learning objectives (encompassing skills acquisition), content, and pedagogy are primary foci for the capstone marketing course.

Following this, the following three course-related questions were addressed in the research:

1. Regarding learning outcomes, what are the objectives for the marketing capstone course?
2. Regarding content, what topics are covered in the course?
3. Regarding pedagogy, what methods are used to convey knowledge and build a skill set and how is learning assessed via the pedagogical methods?

## METHODOLOGY

The methodology utilized in the research followed that of Kurtz, Velliquette, Garretson, Dhodapkar, and Olson (1997), Payne, Whitfield, and Flynn (2002), and Crittenden, Bucks, Fleming, and Wilson (2005). In each of these studies, researchers content-analyzed course syllabi as a means of gaining information about particular courses taught at multiple universities. As a systematic, replicable technique for compressing words into content categories, content analysis is particularly useful for inferring from symbolic data (Stemler 2001). Assuming that syllabi are symbols of what to expect in a course, content analysis was deemed particularly appropriate for addressing the three research questions.

### Syllabi Collection Process

Two approaches were taken in the syllabi gathering process. Initially, a web search for syllabi for the capstone marketing course was conducted and any accessed syllabi were downloaded for the project. Then, the Academy of Marketing Science 2004–2005 membership directory was used as a means of identifying slightly over 300 marketing departments in the United States. The website for each of these marketing departments was searched in an attempt to find the course syllabus, and in instances in which the syllabus was not located on the web, an e-mail was sent to the department chair requesting that a copy of the syllabus be sent either electronically or via slow-mail (or that the e-mail be forwarded to the appropriate persons). This process resulted in the receipt of 122 different capstone marketing course syllabi from 117 schools. Precedent for this data collection method to investigate teaching related issues is found in Crittenden, Bucks, Fleming, and Wilson (2005), Polonsky, Juric, and Mankelow (2003), and Polonsky and Mankelow (2000).

### Content Analysis and Comparison of Syllabi

Three coders evaluated the syllabi. Initially, the syllabi were divided based on geographic region in order to more easily manage the data analysis process. Then, an in-depth analysis of the 122 syllabi was done to determine easily identifiable characteristics (i.e., course title, textbook used, additional readings, grading components, class activities, use of web enhancements, and communication

skills). These static variables were entered into a spreadsheet for ease of viewing and compilation. In the final phase of critical review, the syllabi were evaluated to compile a list of course objectives and a list of course topics. One coder then pared these longer, itemized lists into a more cohesive list of objectives and course topics. Finally, one of the coders reviewed the data for accuracy and external validity in terms of the summary lists.

## RESULTS

The location of responding schools in the United States was as follows:

Northeast	15 syllabi, 14 schools
Mid-Atlantic	24 syllabi, 21 schools
West	18 syllabi, 18 schools
Mountain	11 syllabi, 11 schools
Midwest	25 syllabi, 25 schools
South/Southeast	29 syllabi, 28 schools

Table 1 lists the course titles used by the responding schools. Forty-three percent of the syllabi were from capstone courses entitled Marketing Management. The second most used capstone course name, in 22 percent of the syllabi, was Marketing Strategy. In total, there were 25 different course names for the capstone course on the analyzed syllabi.

### Learning Outcomes

Graeff (1998, p. 13) says that learning objectives, “describe what students will learn from a course and the behaviors (skills) that will demonstrate such learning.” Thus, to answer the first research question, the syllabi were reviewed for stated course objectives related to both content and skill development. From a broad-based view, Chonko and Roberts (1996) presented nine primary learning objectives that business students needed in order to be marketable graduates: critical thinking, full competence in a discipline, communication skills (verbal and written), global/cultural awareness, cross-functional competence, technological competence, leadership, team-based decision making, and learning to learn. Course material outcome objectives were used to summarize content or competence in the marketing discipline. Regarding skill objectives, Barr and McNeilly (2002) suggest that many elements of business school classes help students develop business skills particular to team building, public speaking, business writing, and leadership techniques, while Schibrowsky, Peltier, and Boyt (2002) propose that critical thinking, problem solving, and decision making skills are important marketing professional skills that must be taught, initially, in the classroom. Table 2 presents the categorized objectives for the capstone course.

TABLE 1  
THE CAPSTONE COURSE

Course Title	Number of Schools
Marketing Management	52
Marketing Strategy	27
Strategic Marketing	8
Strategic Marketing Management	4
Marketing Policy	3
Marketing Strategy(ies) and Planning	3
Advanced Marketing Management	2
Advanced Marketing Policy	2
Applied Marketing Management	2
Marketing Management Problems	2
Marketing Policy(ies) and Strategy	2
Marketing Strategy and Management	2
Listed only once were: Cases in Marketing, Developing Marketing Strategies, Global Marketing Strategy, Marketing Cases, Marketing Concepts and Strategies, Marketing Management and Strategy, Marketing Management in a Global Environment, Marketing Management Laboratory, Marketing Management Policies and Programs, Marketing Planning and Analysis, Marketing Problems, Principles of Marketing Management, Seminar in Marketing Strategy	

With respect to course material objectives, the overarching learning objective was to understand marketing strategy concepts, with the integration of previously-learned marketing concepts (e.g., marketing mix) following closely behind. Cross-functional integration was a noted objective in 32 percent of the syllabi. This number is consistent with previous cross-functional findings reported by Crittenden, Wilson, and Duffy (2005) in a study of cross-functionality within marketing. Ferrell (1995) predicted that the marketing curriculum would begin to provide more attention to global issues and ethics/social responsibility, and it appears that, at least a few, capstone courses are including these areas as course learning objectives. The remaining objective, pertaining to marketing's role in business and the world, likely relates closely to the cross-functionality, ethical/legal, and international objectives.

It is important to note that learning outcomes were identified by specific noting as course objectives on the syllabi. Learning expectations regarding specific course content (i.e., material covered) are assessed in the next section. Naturally, a course would likely cover a wide variety of topics, yet not list an expected learning outcome for each topic.

#### Content

To investigate the content or knowledge base of the capstone course, the syllabi were reviewed from two perspectives: (1) the textbook used in the class and (2) topics covered.

*Textbook Used.* Robideaux and Good (2001) suggest that professors rely upon traditional textbooks as the major backbone for knowledge content, and professors in the capstone marketing course are relying upon a wide variety of textbooks. Sixteen different marketing management/marketing strategy texts were listed on 64 syllabi. The Walker, Mullins, Boyd, and Larréché text appeared on the largest number of syllabi. However, Kotler's books overall, with various co-authors, were selected most often. Eight syllabi recommended six traditional introductory marketing textbooks, and 10 syllabi noted a total of nine marketing books that were oriented toward both academia and the trade. (In instances in which introductory textbooks were noted, the syllabus was double-checked to ensure it was for a capstone course and not an introductory course.) Twenty-eight course syllabi required case books, with Kerin and Peterson dominating the selection among the four books noted. Additionally,

TABLE 2  
LEARNING OUTCOMES

Course Material Outcomes	Percent of Syllabi
Understand Marketing Strategy Concepts	71%
Integration of Past Marketing Concepts	53%
Cross-Functional Integration	32%
Understand Role of Marketing in Business/World	24%
Understand Ethical and Legal Issues	11%
Understand Marketing Internationally	10%
Skill Development Outcomes	Percent of Syllabi
Use of Analytical Processes and Planning	64%
Critical Thinking/Problem Solving	51%
Enhance Communication Skills	48%
Enhance Decision Making Skills	36%
Marketing Plan Development	32%
Enhance Implementation Skills	34%
Enhance Team Building Skills	17%
Development of Technological Prowess	14%
Enhance Leadership Skills	3%
Improve Ability to Work in a Business	3%
Adaptability	2%
Professionalism	1%

18 syllabi required course packs, which could include either/both readings and cases. (Some capstone courses noted multiple requirements.) Table 3 provides a breakdown of the books listed on the 122 syllabi reviewed for this project.

Additionally, 10 syllabi listed a *Wall Street Journal* subscription requirement. *Business Week* was a requirement on two syllabi, as was *Fortune* magazine. The *Economist* and *Financial Times* were each mentioned once.

*Topics.* Both a priori (Weber 1990) and emergent coding (Stemler 2001) approaches were used in coding topic data found on the syllabi. Yudelson (1999) discusses the robustness of the four P marketing mix and the central organizing structure the 4 P's (product, price, place, promotion) provide for contemporary marketing management textbooks. Crittenden (2005), however, suggests the 4 C's (customer centrality, competitive capabilities, company collaborations, cyclical connections) as a more strategic marketing orientation, with the 4 P's serving as the tactical elements of the marketing strategy. These eight categories were utilized, a priori, to guide the topical review. However, there were topics covered in classes that did not fit within this preset framework and categories

were allowed to emerge throughout the analysis (e.g., Marketing's Responsibilities, Strategic Planning, and Markets).

Reviewing the data summaries, it becomes obvious that the traditional 4 P's of the marketing mix are the guiding framework for much of the content of the capstone marketing course, with traditional topics such as segmentation/target marketing, competitors, and overall marketing planning/strategy discussed as well. Yudelson (1999) suggested that the 4 P's core concept was quite robust and that marketers could modify or extend the definitions of product, price, place, and promotion in order to keep the operative mnemonic organizing structure. Based on this analysis, it appears that marketing educators have attempted to do that rather than create a new organizing framework.

Notably absent in the results of the content analysis were some of the topical areas that have been suggested over the course of the years—forensic marketing (Bussie 're 2005), reengineering (Aurand, Schroeder, and Yaney 2000), CRM (Rust, Lemon, Narayandas 2005), and mass customization (Pine 1993). While the concept might be enveloped in some of the topical categories, it is interesting that the lexicon did not make its way onto any of the 122 syllabi reviewed in this research project.

TABLE 3  
AUTHORS/BOOKS USED IN THE CAPSTONE MARKETING COURSE

Author	Text	# of Syllabi
<b>MARKETING MANAGEMENT/STRATEGY</b>		
Walker, Mullins, Boyd, Larréché	Mktg Strat: A Decision Focused . . .	12
Kotler	Marketing Management (11e)	9
Kotler	A Framework for Marketing Mgmt.	8
Peter & Donnelly	A Preface to Marketing Mgmt.	7
Kotler	Mktg Mgmt: Analysis, Plan, Imp, & Con	5
Aaker	Strategic Marketing Management	4
Best	Market-Based Mgmt: Strat for Growing . . .	4
Ferrell & Hartline	Marketing Strategy	3
Winer	Marketing Management	3
Walker, Boyd, Larréché	Mktg Strat: Planning & Implementation	2
Lehmann & Winer	Analysis for Marketing Planning	2
Anderson & Vincze	Strat Mktg Mgmt: Meeting the Global Mkt. . . .	1
Cravens & Piercy	Strategic Marketing	1
Ferrell, Hartline, Lucas, Luck	Marketing Strategy	1
Jain	Marketing Planning & Strategy	1
Kotler & Keller	Marketing Management (12e)	1
<b>INTRODUCTORY MARKETING</b>		
Kerin, Hartley, Berkowitz, Rudelius	Marketing	3
Boone & Kurtz	Contemporary Marketing	1
Churchill & Peter	Marketing: Creating Value for Customers	1
Lamb, Hair, McDaniel	Marketing	1
Kotler & Armstrong	Marketing: An Introduction	1
Perrault & McCarthy	Essentials of Marketing	1
<b>CASE BOOKS</b>		
Kerin & Peterson	Strategic Marketing Problems	19
Cravens, Lamb, Crittenden	Strategic Marketing Management Cases	7
Ferrell, Lucas, Luck	Strategic Marketing Mgmt: Text & Cases	1
Lal, Quelch, Rangan	Marketing Mgmt Text & Cases	1
<b>OTHER</b>		
Brandenburger & Nalebuff	Co-Opetition	1
Eliashberg & Lilien	Marketing (Handbook in OR & MS)	1
Hartley	Marketing Mistakes & Successes	2
Levinson	Guerrilla Marketing	1
Levitt	The Marketing Imagination	1
Lilien, Kotler, Moorthy	Marketing Models	1
Peppers & Rogers	The One to One Future	1
Ries & Trout	The 22 Immutable Laws of Marketing	1
Sheff	Game Over	1

#### Pedagogy

Instructional method has long been a concern of marketing teachers and researchers (Crittenden, Crittenden, and Hawes 1999). Smart, Tomkovick, Jones, and Menon (1999) suggest that undergraduate marketing ed-

ucational pedagogy focuses upon lectures, exams, and some form of class project. Linrud and Hall (1999) find that marketing classrooms run the gamut between active and passive learning, with activities such as projects, guest speakers, field trips, and internships. Utilizing depth interviews with eight marketing professors from three

universities, Ackerman, Gross, and Perner (2003) identified five marketing assignments that informants found to foster critical thinking and creativity. These were marketing plans, working with real companies in the classroom, cases, scenario analysis, and computer simulations. As such, analysis for the third research question attempted to gauge the usage of the methods described in previous

work and sought to identify any new pedagogical techniques that professors might be pursuing in the capstone marketing course. Additionally, allocation of the final grade, in conjunction with the pedagogical methods, was also reviewed.

Table 5 provides information on the extent to which various pedagogical approaches are utilized and how

TABLE 4  
TOPICAL COVERAGE

Marketing Mix (4 P's):		Marketing's Responsibilities:	
Product Strategy	52	Financially	48
New Product Development	29	Socially/Ethically	21
Brand Issues	33	Opportunity/Identification	
Product Life Cycle	2	Marketing Research	27
Innovation	16	Forecasting	4
Product Line Management	8	Marketing Intelligence	3
Services	21	Decision Making	16
Positioning/Differentiation	26		
Pricing Strategy	73	<u>Strategic Planning:</u>	
Promotion Strategy	34	Corporate Strategy	10
Marketing Communication	48	Business Strategy	11
Personal Selling	9	Business/Marketing Models	6
Sales Force Management	4	Portfolio Analysis	5
Sales Strategy	14	Company Analysis	7
Distribution Strategy	57	SWOT	20
E-Commerce	16	Growth Strategies	14
Retailing/Wholesaling	14	Market Orientation	4
Supply Chain Management	4	Market Planning/Strategy	63
Direct Marketing	13	Comprehensive Mktg Prog.	11
		Marketing Plan	29
Marketing Axiom (4 C's):		<u>Markets:</u>	
Customer	11	International	27
Segmentation/Targeting	79	B2B/Organizational/Government	18
Consumer Relations	27	Nonprofit	1
Consumer Behavior	36	Sports	1
Value Management	15		
Competitor	54		
End Game Strategies	1		
Mature Marketing Strategies	10		
Competitive Strategy	22		
Stealth Marketing	1		
Collaboration			
Cross Functional Integration	8		
Internal Marketing	3		
Partner Selection	2		
Technology/Info Systems	17		
Cyclical Connections			
Mktg. Strat. Reformulation	12		
Implementation	14		
Control Systems	9		
Performance Metrics	4		

TABLE 5  
PEDAGOGY & LEARNING ASSESSMENT

Method	% Utilizing	
Cases	80	
Teamwork	84	
Computer Simulation	28	
Guest Speakers	11	
Lectures	100	
In-Class Discussions	99	
Field Trip(s)	1	
Experiential Exercises	32	
Assessment	% Utilizing	Avg. Weight
Exams	68	41%
Cases	68	31%
Participation	75	15%
Project	73	37%
Other	58	21%

student learning is assessed in the capstone marketing course. Lectures, in-class discussions, teamwork, and cases are the predominant pedagogical methods utilized in the course. Experiential exercises and simulations are utilized by around a third of the respondent course professors. It is suspected, however, that the use of guest speakers is undercounted in the content analysis as professors may not list speakers on the syllabus. Rather, the professor may be “hoping” for a speaker for a particular topic or plan to juggle the schedule if a particular speaker becomes available. Given the nature of a student’s schedule with other classes, work, sports, etc., it was not surprising that field trips were noted on only one syllabus of the 122 received for review.

Exams, projects, and cases carried the heaviest percentages in grade calculations. Of the 73 percent of the responding schools having a project component to the course, over half of these projects were that of a marketing plan and slightly over one third for a computer simulation. The Marketing Game and MarkStrat were noted most often in courses using simulations, with PharmaSim also used in a couple of classes (however, not all syllabi with a simulation component gave the name of the simulation). In conjunction with the projects and cases, ten syllabi noted requirements for both case and project oral presentations during the term of the course. Eighteen syllabi required oral presentations of cases only, and 37 syllabi required oral presentations related to the class project. The professionalism requirement for the presentation was noted very clearly on one syllabus with an additional reading of *How to do Everything with Microsoft Office PowerPoint* (Finkelstein 2003). Professors often find the

tracking (and justification) of in-class participation to be difficult, as well as biased against students who are shy or for whom English is not the first language, which likely results in the lower weighting of this assessment technique.

One other teaching-learning tool was evaluated in the content analysis. Schaefer and McCorkle (2003) discuss the use of technology in state-of-the-art teaching. As such, coders searched for the use of web enhancements when reviewing the syllabi. Essentially, the goal was to identify how often various web-based tools were noted explicitly for the students (which, in turn, would likely mean that the professor utilized the web tool). Almost 25 percent of the capstone syllabi noted some form of online posting or information exchange for the course. A course website was noted for 11 percent of the syllabi, Blackboard was listed for eight percent of the syllabi, and WebCT for three percent of the syllabi. A virtual storage file and a chat room were noted singularly in the data.

#### SUMMARY AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The purpose of this in-depth review of course syllabi was to better understand what is taught and how the material is taught in the capstone marketing course. As a required course in many marketing curricula, it would seem imperative that marketing educators have a general consensus of what is expected of students in this class. This is particularly important since the marketing curriculum is not guided by external testing boards as those found in the accounting and finance business functional areas. An extensive review of the marketing education

scholarship noted that a composite view of this seemingly important capstone course was lacking in educational scholarship.

Findings from this content analysis of course syllabi support Schibrowsky, Peltier, and Boyt's (2002) notion that professional marketing programs provide both theoretical foundations of marketing and practical skills. The traditional marketing mix framework (i.e., 4 Ps) provides the theoretical foundation from which most capstone marketing courses build the plan of study, with the underlying focus that of understanding and integrating marketing concepts acquired in previous marketing course. It appears that the traditional marketing mix framework does serve as the guiding principle in the design of individual marketing capstone courses and that marketing educators are not quick to build emerging marketing ideas into the capstone curriculum.

Interestingly, and possibly even disheartening, is that marketing educators do not tend to be reaching into the non-traditional and/or newer thoughts regarding marketing's role in organizations and society. There appears to be little creativity or newness in the concepts covered in the capstone course. While not studied in the current project, it may be that professors have little, if any, incentive to expand beyond the traditionally-accepted theoretical foundation of marketing. Doing so would require considerable extra work since marketing textbooks abound that focus on the traditional framework and an expansion beyond that would require creating a course without the benefit of a textbook outline as the starting point. On the positive side, however, is that marketing educators do present an overall consistency in the theoretical foundation of the course via the topics covered in the capstone class. Thus, it is reasonable to expect graduates of marketing programs to possess a common body of knowledge in marketing.

Regarding practical skills, there is again consistency across the courses reviewed in this study. Developing the student's analytical process, critical thinking, and problem solving abilities are the basis for this capstone course, with enhancing communication skills as a primary emphasis as well. These practical skills are often reflective of skills employers are looking for in new hires (JobWeb.com 2004). Professor and student classroom interaction in the marketing capstone course is also rather consistent across programs in the study. The overall tendency is for a classroom that includes lecture, in-class discussion, and case analysis. Additionally, teamwork is still a predominant form of student interaction, with the likely team engagement being the preparation of a marketing plan. Although technology enables professors and students to interact differently, the vast majority of syllabi reviewed did not note technological usage.

## Future Research

Findings in this content analysis of the marketing capstone syllabus can be used as the basis for further teaching scholarship as related to one of the function's most important courses. An interesting follow-up study could examine the effectiveness of the theoretical and practical knowledge gained in the course. Such a study would be consistent with the "Assurance of Learning" standards established by AACSB International (2006). A study such as this would likely engage program alumni in conjunction with employers and recruiters. Essentially, are marketing capstone courses doing the right thing?

A slightly different twist on effectiveness would delve into student perceptions of the course protocol (i.e., are the marketing capstone courses doing things right?). It would be interesting to obtain information as to what students thought about the course – its format, the textbook used, the use of cases, material covered, and projects engaged. While this information is often included in student evaluations, a direct measure of pedagogical methods would be valuable customer information.

From an exploratory perspective, it would also be interesting to examine the professor's rationale for constructing the capstone course in the manner exhibited on the syllabus. An initial examination would likely require one-on-one discussions with various faculty members. In an attempt to begin this type of investigation, one professor was asked her rationale for the syllabus structure that was included in this initial study of syllabi. This professor had submitted a syllabus that did not fit the theoretical norm that had evolved in the syllabi. Essentially, the professor said that she felt that capstone courses were redundant and that they should be used to introduce students to cutting edge marketing issues that had not yet made it into textbooks. An interesting follow-up study to the one reported here would be to engage in further qualitative research as to why instructors develop the capstone course in the manner presented in the class syllabus.

Finally, the syllabi used in the current study could now be compared based on demographic information such as geographic location, institutional type (e.g., public vs. private), classroom size, and student population (e.g., residential vs. commuter). For example, in a study of cross-functional marketing education, Crittenden and Wilson (2006) found a difference between private and public schools. In their study, cross-functional education was more of a priority in undergraduate programs in private schools than undergraduate programs in public schools. Demographic information about the schools and programs from which the syllabi were gathered could be obtained from individual school websites and analysis could be conducted to see if there are significant differences based on such variables.



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