

Marketing and Ethics: A Critical Approach to Ethics in the Classroom

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In the aftermath of Enron, WorldCom and accounting industry scandals, a new standard of ethics is emerging for business professionals. Business is looking to education for answers. The directive for marketing educators is clear—to create value by creating a value-consciousness in students. The purpose of this paper is to address the question, “How can we as marketing educators effectively implement value-drive instruction?” First, ethical foundations will be discussed. Next a critical thinking methodology will be reviewed for its application to value-focused instruction. Finally, the use of debates in support of a critical thinking approach will be examined as a method of classroom instruction.

Introduction

In this 21st century, a new standard in character is emerging for business professionals. The crisis of confidence and trust in leaders and corporations, is forcing a re-evaluation of ethical standards. In the aftermath of Enron, WorldCom and accounting industry scandals, business leaders are looking for answers. Education has been recognized as one answer. In response, business ethics is a new initiative on several college campuses (SIFE 2002). As companies are being held to higher standards, recruiters are looking not just for skills but also character (Merritt 2002) in new college graduates. Educators are being asked more than ever to stress the foundations of true integrity (Freitag 2000). The question becomes, “What are we as marketing educators doing to support this emerging trend?”

The purpose of this paper is to equip marketing educators with tools to lead ethical initiatives in their classes and curriculum development. More specifically, the objective is to offer one practical implementation directive that addresses the “What” and “How” of value-focused instruction in marketing. First, the ethical foundations for value-driven instruction will be discussed. Next, a brief discussion of a critical thinking approach to learning will be reviewed. The use of debates will be discussed for classroom instruction. Finally, the effectiveness of this technique will be given a cursory assessment based on student feedback.

Ethical Foundation

Ethics is conceptually based in the notion of what is right and wrong. It involves values and actions. *Doing* what’s right (actions) is to a large degree determined by *knowing* what’s right (values). It is also clearly a function of *willingness* to do right. As some students have questioned, “Can I afford to do right?” (Taylor 2002). Both aspects of knowing and willingness must be addressed in the “what” of value-based instruction to gain optimal outcomes (actions)

from students. Although the student will ultimately determine their actions in the workplace, their *knowledge* of morally sound decisions and *willingness* to implement morally sound decisions can be influenced in the classroom.

The “What”

Knowledge of what’s right is clearly founded on sound education in marketing principles. A primary responsibility of marketing educators is to establish good marketing practices in the minds of students (Birck 2002). Many students characterize marketing and business as inherently corrupt where decisions are made on the basis of profit at the expense of morals. The stereotype of a non-caring, profit-seeking, self-maximizing business person is generated for many from the state of current events. Consequently, students perceive a risk—the risk of failure—if they include morality (vs. profit only) as a basis for decisions.

While corrupt marketing practices and people with these stereotypes do exist, these are clearly not the norm. Marketing educators can solidify the elements of “good” marketing practice and instill in the students’ belief systems that moral business is “good” business. Reaffirming this notion on a day-by-day basis with solid instruction on sound marketing principles should deepen students’ understanding and help to reduce perceived risk. This should increase students’ *willingness* to include morality as a basis for decision-making. Marketing educators can and should address this issue consistently throughout marketing courses showing students that sound marketing principles and ethics do go hand-in-hand. Students must know that I can be value-conscious and still be successful. For students to be willing to do what’s right, they must understand that ethical decision-making is certainly about doing the right thing, but it also adds great value to shareholders (Readers Respond 2002).

While students may accept marketing principles as “good” based on the professor’s value system, the student’s value system must be tapped to ensure acceptance and internalization of sound principles and for determining “right” application. These value systems are uncovered when students are asked to select criteria for determining “what’s right.” One of the greatest challenges in value-focused instruction for marketing educators is establishing agreed upon criteria to determine “what’s right.” These deeper issues of knowing what’s right will rely on the spiritual domain which introduces the challenge of spanning multiple Christian worldviews. A common ground should be achievable, however. As suggested by one business leader, “if you ever question what’s right and what’s wrong, grab the nearest five-year-old and ask them. It’s really clear to a child, and it should be to all of us” (Merritt 2002a, p. 4).

One way of achieving common ground is to identify behaviors that “cross the line” (Merritt 2002b). As students are asked to discuss behaviors that cross the line in a variety of situations, their criteria for determining the “right” or “wrong” of an action began to emerge. These criteria are best uncovered through a “discovery” process early in the semester. For those professors who have the opportunity of teaching at a Christian university, these criteria will typically include the Bible. Once an accepted set of criteria have been developed, these criteria can be used for ethical discussions through-out the semester.

Establishing these criteria empowers students with the ability to judge situations for “right” actions and then determine their own courses of action. Even good marketing principles, may be *applied* unethically. This deeper knowledge of ethical motivations (based on value systems) will assist students in applying principles “rightly” in business settings. Through academic discourse, students can further discover their own value systems—ones that they have confirmed with peers, internalized, and can apply in future situations. They can then clarify their

knowing of what's right for morally sound marketing decisions. Ethics cannot be taught simply as a list of do's and don'ts. Of course, the list could never be complete but more importantly, with a heightened understanding of underlying determinants, students can apply criteria in unfamiliar situations to determine appropriate behaviors.

By addressing these *knowledge* and *willingness* issues in the classroom, students are more ethically grounded for morally responsible *actions* in the work environment. With these fundamental concepts in mind for determining the “what” of value-based instruction, a critical thinking approach using debates will be discussed relative to one “how” of value-based instruction.

The “How”

A Methodology. An approach to learning used in classroom instruction that is useful for value-drive instruction is critical thinking. Critical thinking has received a lot of “talk” for classrooms but is often implemented weakly at best. Critical thinking may actually be considered an attitude and a process—an attitude of exploration and assessment, and a process of active consideration of ideas (Harris 2001). The outcomes of this process are that students build and strengthen their own convictions. Consequently, this process is especially conducive to value-based learning.

A basic approach to critical thinking (Ruggiero 1993), augmented with a value perspective is to: 1) Decide what you think and why you think it, 2) Seek other views and more evidence, 3) Determine if your view is strategically sound, 4) Determine if your view is ethically (morally) sound, and finally, 5) Change your view if it's not supported. To implement this approach in a value-focused, Christian context, the (additional) Step 4 has been added.

Specifically, students are asked to determine if their view is ethically (morally) sound—is this view consistent with what the Bible teaches?

The critical thinking approach with the professor’s guidance helps students sift through key issues and develop and/or strengthen value-based convictions. The “new” Step 4 helps to uncover underlying issues that students can use in determining morally sound actions in future marketing situations. Thus, the critical thinking process helps students develop sound *judgment*, as mentioned previously, a core building block of ethical decision-making (Birck 2002). One activity that has been especially useful in value-based instruction will be discussed here—the use of debates. This activity further incorporates the instructional techniques of reflection and modeling, both of which encourage a deeper understanding of motivating values.

A Classroom Activity. Informal debates (less structured than formal debates) are helpful for clarifying and shaping values and have been used successfully in upper division marketing courses. Debates are effectively implemented at this level since these classes involve marketing majors only. Students seem to have stronger convictions about their values as they relate to marketing since they have selected this major as a profession. Discussion is enhanced by their deepened understanding of underlying issues and hopefully, a greater level of maturity to competitively debate a topic.

With the debate format, students are assigned to teams. Each team is assigned one side of a debate issue. Teams are asked to discuss the issue in terms of ethical/moral considerations. Most importantly, students are asked to include the Biblical support (including scriptural references) for their side of an issue. Teams argue two sides of a selected issue in class followed by an open-class discussion of the topic. Students not presenting the debate are asked to complete a debate brief highlighting both sides of an issue in preparation for class discussion.

Underlying values are easily tapped in the class discussion. The text “Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Controversial Issues in Marketing” has been helpful in identifying debate issues (Macchiette and Roy 2001). A sample debate topic from this text might be “Should marketers target vulnerable groups?”

The debate technique when coupled with the critical thinking methodology has proven especially effective for analyzing and shaping value systems. On the date of the debate *at the beginning of class*, all students (both those presenting and those observing) are asked to decide their view on the issue (This represents Critical Thinking Approach Step 1). After the debate and class discussion (This represents Critical Thinking Approach Step 2 and Step 3), students are asked to re-state their view (Step 4). If some students change their view, further discussion can center on what motivated the changes. This process is also effective for professor modeling of the critical thinking process—another important instructional technique for value-based instruction.

During class discussion, the professor may verbalize his/her thinking with regard to key issues, criteria, and analysis of the topic. It is important, however, that the professor refrain from presenting his/her view as the “right” view. Students must perceive the professor as a facilitator—someone to assist them with the clarification and definition of ethical issues. Students then gain greater insight into the critical thinking process as the professor models his/her thinking and should experience greater internalization of important concepts. This further increases the student’s ability to *judge* a situation and apply the process in future on-the-job marketing situations. This value-based instruction is far more effective, as mentioned previously, when taught as a process, rather than an “answer.”

Reflections

To do a partial assessment of the implementation effectiveness of the above methodology and activity, students were queried. Students were enrolled in an upper-division level, capstone marketing course. The critical thinking approach and debates had been implemented in this classroom. Students were asked to reflect on their class experience to identify what they liked most about the class. Following are selected comments:

-I really liked the class format...more group discussion and interactive learning. I think we learn more [by] talking subjects through and ...[by] talking about real company situations rather than being talked at. This class format is unlike almost any other classes...

-I really loved the debates! I am sorry we only had the chance to debate one [issue]. They were fun and they made us think.

-The discussions about ethics were invaluable. It got me thinking objectively about many issues that had previously gone unnoticed.

-The ethical dilemmas, "gray areas" that we discussed were very helpful in opening my eyes to situations I may face...

-The greatest value I placed on this class is the understanding of marketing/business ethics.

-The in-class [ethics] discussions were thought provoking. We need more of these.

-This class made me focus more on ethical and moral values of marketing. It allowed me to see the effectiveness of marketing and the ability to be successful in marketing without compromising one's moral values.

-I really enjoyed the debates. They allowed me to critically analyze by looking at the views of others [while] assessing my own.

-I realized some real issues that I will face in the work place and how to approach them.

-I really liked the ethical discussions in this class.

-I really enjoyed the debates.

-I really enjoyed the debates.

This feedback from students offers some support for the effectiveness of the previously mentioned "how's" and "what's" of value-based learning in marketing. This feedback affirms the notion that the marketing educator's role in creating value is to create a value-consciousness in students.

Conclusion

One educator has described the values issue in this way: “the postmodern challenge is whether the academy is now willing to bear responsibility again for educating students to respond to the moral and political dilemmas of our time” (Fong 2002). Students must be equipped to live in a world where moral decisions must be made. Students must be equipped to live in a world where character counts. There should be continuity between how one earns a living and the values that motivate one’s life (Fong 2002). This academic shift coupled with the latest focus on ethical standards in business initiatives, offers a clear directive for marketing educators.

There are some who might say, however, “I am not responsible for my students’ decisions after leaving college. Ethical decisions are a personal matter. Marketing educators should not get involved.” Educators are not responsible for every student’s decision nor are they guarantors of students’ values. Educators can, however, influence student decision-making processes (Hartman 2002). As so aptly put in the Society for Business Ethics Presidential Address,

“...if we did not believe we could impact [students’] decisions, perhaps we should not be doing what we do. To the contrary, if we do believe we can have an impact, are we not responsible somewhat for the nature of that impact?” (Hartman 2002, p. 2).

I believe I can have an impact. More importantly, I believe I have a responsibility to shape the “nature of that impact.” Consequently, I have implemented the above value-based initiatives in my classrooms and would like to encourage others to implement such initiatives.

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