

Identifying Ethical Challenges in the Marketing Mix: Experiential Exercise Themes and Variations

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Abstract. To be effective ethical business leaders, students need experience identifying ethical dilemmas. Textbooks provide models and guidelines to categorize ethical challenges, yet students need practice applying these tools in the real world. The exercise described in this study is designed to do just that by helping students learn to identify ethical challenges in marketing. Using the marketing mix as a framework, this scavenger hunt-like exercise provides significant learning experiences by emphasizing teamwork, out of classroom learning, and meeting students where they are with technology. The exercise may be used at either an undergraduate or graduate level in business ethics classes. Learning themes tapped in this exercise can be realized in the on-site classroom or the virtual classroom. Further variations on these themes conclude the article.

Keywords: identifying ethical challenges, marketing mix, experiential exercise, ethics, real world.

1. Introduction

Failure to apply ethical decision making in the marketing mix can be disastrous for managers, businesses, and society writ-large (see for example: Eagle, Dahl, De Pelsmacker, & Taylor 2020; Parguel & Monnot 2020; Kagendo-Kiarie 2022). Failure to identify ethical dilemmas in marketing has resulted in, for example, plummeting sales (i.e., for Fisher Price's potentially dangerous product Rock 'n Play Sleeper), public outcry (i.e., over Pepsi's trivializing social movements by using Kendall Jenner for promotion), and even Congressional oversight (i.e., over Turing's price gouging of drug Daraprim). Teaching ethical decision making in the marketing mix, then, is critical for business student education, company effectiveness, and societal well-being. In this paper, we introduce a classroom exercise to raise business student awareness of potential ethical dilemmas encountered across the marketing mix, originally conceived of as the 4 Ps of Marketing: Product, Price, Place, Promotion (McCarthy 1964).

Ethical decision making across the marketing mix may be seen as a subset of ethical decision making in organizations (Jones 1991; Laczniak 2008; Kamila &

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Jasrotia 2023). Most ethical decision making models in business begin where Rest's (1986) individual model of decision making began: identification/awareness of an ethical dilemma. Indeed, in one of the most cited general theories of marketing ethics, Hunt and Vitell (1986) trigger their decision making model with the perception of a problem with ethical content, and more recent models follow suit (see for example: McDevitt, Giapponi, and Tromley 2007 and Hartman, DesJardins, & MacDonald 2021). To be effective ethical business leaders, then, business students need practice identifying such dilemmas or challenges. Because there is a public perception of marketing ethics as oxymoronic (Pitts & Cooke 1991), it seems particularly imperative to train business students to identify ethical challenges in marketing.

To that end, we introduce an experiential exercise (Kolb 1984) for classroom use to help train business students to identify ethical challenges in the marketing mix. We use the marketing mix (McCarthy 1964) as a conceptual framework for categorizing ethical dilemmas because of its dominance in marketing practice (Constantinides 2006), and particularly, marketing education (Doyle 2012). Specifically, the exercise we present offers students experience in identifying ethical challenges in the key areas of strategic marketing decisions: product, price, place, and promotion (McCarthy's 1964 "4Ps"). The exercise can be used in expanded definitions/re-conceptualizations of the marketing mix, as well, as we explain in the concluding sections.

We are guided in our presentation of this exercise by our reading of Fink's (2013) notions of significant learning experiences coupled with research positing that experiential exercises are effective ways for students to learn management concepts such as business ethics (Thor, York, & Wharton, 2014; Potter 2009; Sims 2002). Per Fink (2013), our active learning exercise asks students to "do" and "observe" in reflective dialog with themselves and others (their team and class). We ask them, specifically to do and observe outside of the classroom, per Thor, et al., citing Jurkiewicz, Giacalone, and Knouse 2004, who suggest that we connect student learning to their direct and personal experience in service to transferring classroom learning to real world knowledge. Indeed, much research in higher education supports active learning through out-of-classroom experiences. In extolling virtues of real world learning, through field trips, Jakubowski (2003), combines 1) Hutchings and Wutzdorff's (1988) encapsulation of reflection as stepping back and pondering experiences to abstract meaning, with 2) Eyler and Giles (1991) use of such reflection to engender new understanding of the social world as an engine of behavioral change. We similarly extol out-of-classroom real world observation and reflection as a means to better ethical understanding and ultimately business decision-making.

In considering how to best get students to actively learn by "doing" and "observing", we are further persuaded by advocates of the high-impact of field-based learning (Heriot, Cook, Matthews, & Simpson 2007). Indeed, Heriot and associates propose the notion of "active learning outside of the classroom" as a

counterpoint to the dominant form of active learning within the classroom. As Bliemel (2013), (writing in the context of entrepreneurship studies) notes, the panacea for university-based business education lies in experiential learning opportunities, which ironically might be best accomplished off-campus and in the ‘real world.’ As an example, Clark (2019) provides a pioneering “[b]eyond the classroom” semester-long experiential exercise, specifically in business ethics. While most proponents of such learning experiences emphasize semester projects and/or consulting gigs, we follow Schaller’s (2020) template of implementing field-based experiential learning in marketing through short-term learning activities such as scavenger hunts.

Two further considerations common to significant learning experiences lead us to incorporate both the use of student teams and the utilization of technology in our exercise. Picking up on Fink’s (2013) idea that active student learning involves dialog with others, we implement our exercise using student partnerships or teams (depending upon the size of the class). Given the abundant evidence that team learning is a particularly effective instructional method in the college (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith 1991) and particularly, the ethics classroom (see, for example: Peek, Peek, Roxas, Robichaud, & Blanco 2007, and Matchett 2009), we have designed this exercise to also capitalize on the reflective opportunities that the team structure provides. Knipfer, Kump, Wessel and Cress (2013), specifically tie team reflection to organizational learning, further underpinning the connection between student significant learning experiences and eventual organizational outcomes.

Our last consideration in designing a significant learning experience in identifying ethical challenges in marketing is to incorporate student-preferred technology. As early as 2006, Kim, Mims, and Holmes introduced benefits of mobile learning (m-learning) in higher education. By 2008, Cui and Wang were predicting that students would greatly benefit from using cell phone cameras for collecting and documenting data. A whole field of inquiry on m-learning since, has resulted in meta-analyses of success factors using such techniques (see, for example: Wu, Wu, Chen, Kao, Lin, & Huang 2012 and Alrasheedi & Capretz 2013). Survey after survey has demonstrated student interest (see, for example: Woodcock, Middleton, & Nortcliffe, 2012; Hanif, Asrowi, & Sunardi 2018), if not preference (see, for example; Johnson, & Radhakrishnan 2017; Mammadova 2018), for using smart phones for learning at the college level. Making use of smartphones in the classroom, then is about meeting students where they (already) are as an educational technique.

Putting these active and impactful learning techniques together in service to our goal of providing students practice in identifying ethical dilemmas in the marketing mix, we have devised the formal learning objectives of this exercise:

1. To increase students’ ability to identify ethical challenges in the marketing mix,

2. To increase students' opportunities to detect ethical challenges in the "real world" outside of the classroom,
3. To increase students' competence in working in teams to detect ethical challenges and
4. To increase students' use of their everyday technology-cell phones—to document, organize, and present their learnings.

We describe the (in and out of the) classroom implementation of the exercise in depth below.

2. The Exercise

Materials: LMS (Moodle, Canvas, Blackboard, etc.) and/or classroom wiki/shared documenting software, student-supplied smartphones with cameras, a marketing mix (product, price, place, promotion) – rich building/campus/community environment.

This exercise is best introduced a few sessions into the semester. In a business ethics course, students should already be familiar with basic ethical frameworks but may/will need to be (re)introduced to the marketing mix concept. It might be helpful to show a summary slide (See Appendix A for content options) or conduct a quick discussion about the ethical frameworks that students have at their disposal. In a marketing class, students should already be familiar with the marketing mix, but will need to be introduced (or re-introduced) to basic ethical frameworks including utilitarianism, deontology, virtue ethics, Confucian ethics, ethics of care and/or ethics of justice. For the marketing mix reminder, it is suggested that instructors review some of the strategic decisions that can be made under a 4Ps framework. Instructors might point to egregious cases of marketing failures/scandals that occurred in the absence of ethical decision making in the marketing mix. Such examples could include: (Price) Pharmaceutical company, Mylan's significant increase of the price of EpiPens (Lyon 2016) or (Promotion) R.J. Reynold's use of the Joe Camel cartoon character to promote cigarette use to children (DiFranza, Richards, Paulman, Wolf-Gillespie, Fletcher, Jaffe, & Murray 1991). Beyond providing such examples, instructors can use Appendix B for sample content for slides that can be used to prime students' thinking about marketing decisions. Given likely necessary reviews of the marketing mix and ethical frameworks, this exercise is best implemented in a 2 or more hour class session, though it may be abbreviated if necessary.

Steps of the Exercise Implementation

Step 1: Set up exercise report out/submission portal on LMS (may be done before class), or open up new exercise wiki or shared document. The exercise is best