

TEACHING THE PROMOTION MIX: ARE WE GIVING OUR STUDENTS THE "RIGHT" MIX?

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ABSTRACT

Arguably, the part of the marketing curriculum which has seen the greatest proliferation of courses is *promotion*. The reason for this is probably that *promotion*, one of the four elements of the marketing mix, itself comprises five elements — advertising, direct marketing, personal selling, sales promotion, and public relations. These elements each have advantages and disadvantages, and marketers have to learn how to "blend" them into an effective combination. There is no one "right" blend of these factors. While many people think that most promotion money is spent on advertising — no doubt because of its high visibility — the fact is that, in total, less money is spent on advertising than on personal selling or sales promotion. And growing in importance is direct marketing.

Much media attention has been focussed on the declining importance of advertising in the USA in recent years. The reasons given for this are that many Americans, brought up on a steady diet of commercials, view advertising with cynicism or indifference. In an increasingly competitive business environment, marketers are looking for more "measurable" returns on their promotion expenditures. Advertising typically relies on long-term image building to influence consumers and it is consequently very difficult to measure its impact on sales accurately. On the other hand, the return on expenditure on personal selling, sales promotion and direct marketing can be determined fairly accurately. Given this changing business environment and its impact on firms' promotion mix expenditures, it was deemed appropriate to establish how marketing educators are preparing their students to deal with the new realities of the marketplace.

Data for the survey was collected by means of a questionnaire mailed to all 330 current members of the *Western Marketing Educators' Association* residing in the USA. A total of 88 usable questionnaires was returned, a response rate of 26.7%. The first question asked respondents which undergraduate *promotion* courses are currently offered by their marketing departments. At both Junior and Senior level, Advertising is offered by more of the respondents' marketing departments than any other course — 46.6% and 38.6% respectively.

The second question asked respondents which promotion courses are *required* for undergraduate marketing majors. At the Junior level, the most frequently required course for marketing majors is Advertising (18.20%), whereas at the Senior level it is Marketing Communications (9.1%). What is perhaps of most significance is the very low percentages recorded in response to this question. It could quite legitimately be asked if a marketing major could, in truth, be considered to have an adequate knowledge of the marketing discipline without having taken at least one of the promotion courses!

The third question asked respondents to estimate the percentage weight they allocated to each component in the course if promotion is taught as an integrated *Marketing Communications* course. The overwhelming percentage weight was reported to be allocated to Advertising (53.3%). Trailing very far behind was Sales Promotion (14%) and Personal Selling (13.5%). Even further behind was Public Relations (10.5%) and last was Direct Marketing (8.7%).

The percentage weight allocated by respondents to each component in terms of total time spent on teaching the promotion mix in the *Principles of Marketing or Introduction to Marketing Management* course was Advertising (44.1%), Personal Selling (23.3%), Sales Promotion (15.0%), Public Relations (9.8%), and Direct Marketing (7.8%).

This survey reveals an overwhelming focus by the marketing educators polled on advertising which, for a number of reasons, is becoming far less important in the overall promotion activities of marketers today. Despite the fact that marketing academics generally concede the importance of personal selling and sales management, this is not reflected in the emphasis given these courses by the respondents to this survey. Marketing students will inevitably infer that the amount of attention given to the various elements of the promotion mix by marketing educators must indicate the relative importance of each element. It therefore behooves us to ensure that we are not giving our students the "wrong" mix when teaching promotion, and to ensure that they are receiving a balanced and realistic perspective of this all-important element of the marketing mix.