

Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 9, 1982

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN CONSUMER BEHAVIOR: PERCEPTUAL AND ATTITUDE CHANGE EXERCISES

Gregory H. Gazda, San Diego State University
Mary J. Molenaar, San Diego State University
John M. Kunysz, Jr., Price, Waterhouse & Company

ABSTRACT

Many of the concepts taught in a Consumer Behavior course are abstract in nature and are therefore more difficult for many students to grasp. These authors have found that involving the students in practical exercises not only makes the concepts more interesting, but helps clarify them and thus provides motivation for learning. This article presents experiential learning exercises used to examine perception and attitude change, as well as operational hints based on experience and variations that might be used.

INTRODUCTION

The teaching of consumer behavior in the classroom setting is an interesting and a trying experience. Concepts such as learning, perception and attitude change are often difficult to understand because they occur on a subconscious level. Also, the borrowing nature of consumer behavior requires student familiarity with a variety of other disciplines. Unfortunately, many marketing majors do not have a broad base of classes in sociology and psychology and find the abstract concepts involved in consumer behavior difficult to understand with ease. The concepts in many cases must be made less abstract in order to facilitate learning [4].

Using learning theory, which is a part of the Consumer Behavior course, these authors have found that involving the student in practical exercises not only makes the concepts more interesting, but also clarifies what is being discussed and provides motivation for learning (i.e., motivation is stronger when students feel a subject is meaningful or relevant to them, as is the case when content deals with real things and real problems) [5]. Experiential learning has also been found to increase the students' confidence in their knowledge of the subject matter [3].

With this in mind, various projects (both in-class and out-of-class) are assigned during the semester in order to make the concepts in consumer behavior more practical. The student interest in and reaction to these exercises has been very good. Two of these projects will be discussed in this paper.

PERCEPTUAL WALK

The first exercise is a walk which students take for at least thirty minutes and during which they attempt to "perceive" what is occurring around them. Perception is commonly defined as the interpretation of stimuli [6]. Perception as it applies to marketing is thought of as a process which serves to filter the myriads of stimuli to which an individual is exposed in his daily life. Through this filter he receives information that shapes and molds his character and personality, and he then develops attitudes toward objects, people, and events around him [1].

Each student's perceptual walk is a unique walk since each perceives different stimuli even when walking in a similar area. A description of the instructions for this walk are as

follows:

You are to take at least thirty minutes and take a perceptual walk. You should jot down things, feelings, etc. which you perceive. You should talk to no one and you should do this walk alone. If someone you know talks to you, simply tell them you are engaged in a project and will talk to them later. Take a note pad with you to jot down your perceptions.

After you finish your perceptual walk, you should write a short paper in which you analyze the stimuli which you perceived and indicate why you think you perceived them. This paper should be no more than two typewritten pages and is due this Monday. Have an interesting time!

The walk can be taken anywhere the student chooses and at any time. Some walks have been taken at 2:00 in the morning. However, most walks are taken in familiar surroundings near apartments or near scenic areas such as parks. Interestingly, the things that are perceived are far from common and in fact make the students realize how much they are overlooking. Another result of this exercise is realizing how much certain senses are used while other senses are neglected. By far the most common senses used in this perceptual walk are those of sight and hearing which are about equally perceived. Much less used are the senses of smell and internal sensing, while touch and taste are hardly perceived at all.

The students are then asked to write a two-page typewritten analysis of what they perceived and why. This prompts them to focus on the interpretative aspect of perception and thus to see that perception is more than just sensing or feeling something. Having used this exercise for approximately four years in consumer behavior classes, the authors have discovered certain factors and ideas which are helpful in operationalizing the perceptual walk. These operational hints follow.

Operational Hints

1. The need for the students to refrain from talking to others during the perceptual walk is important, since it is more difficult to perceive while they are talking.
2. A preliminary discussion of perception is useful before the students do their perceptual walk, or at least the reading of the perception chapter in their Consumer Behavior text. We define perception as the interpretation of stimuli, not mere exposure or sensation and we use Paul Young's description of perception [6]:

To Perceive is to	See	some	Thing
	Hear		Event
	Touch		Relation
	Taste		
	Smell		
	Sense Internally		

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3. This exercise helps make the abstract concept of perception practical for many students. However, the students should be given sufficient time, perhaps three or four days, so that they can really think about what they perceived and why. We have found that making the students turn in a typed analysis along with a class discussion of their perceptions is more effective than merely discussing this perceptual walk in class. Sometimes there is a tendency among some students not to analyze their perceptions, but simply to report them. Focusing on the need for analyzing is important before the perceptual walk takes place. This is particularly important since it is the analysis, or interpretation, of stimuli which distinguishes perception from mere sensation or exposure.
4. An effective way to discuss the perceptual walk is to have a round robin discussion with each of the students in the class discussing the highlights of their walks in 30 seconds. Knowing in advance that they will be doing this forces the students to organize their thoughts and tends to be more effective than just asking for volunteers. Afterwards, the professor can return to any unusual or interesting perceptions to highlight. Particularly interesting perceptions can be used or illustrated in subsequent classes.
5. When the sense of smell is discussed it usually is laden with nostalgic overtones. Oftentimes the smell of bacon or of a fire burning in a fireplace brings back memories of earlier years. Also, the smell of something cooking almost always reminds students of their hunger.
6. An important factor that a professor could emphasize is the difference between internal and external perception. The external perception is the perception of the sound or sight. The internal perception is the feeling that is associated with perceiving a particular object or situation (i.e., the feeling of nostalgia upon smelling a fire in a fireplace)

Variations

The original version of the perceptual walk allows students to walk anywhere they please. It might be enlightening to have part of the class take a perceptual walk in the same supermarket, and another part of the class take a walk in the same department store. In this way students would have a common ground on which to evaluate their perception or see how their perceptions differed from others. Many students are just as interested in how others perceived a situation as in their own perceptions.

Another variation would attempt to create a perceptual event (other than a walk). Since the walk primarily prompts sight and hearing perceptions, the professor could assign a perceptual eat where several students would eat an apple, popcorn, or an ice cream cone and their perceptions would be compared.

A third variation would be to deprive students of one sense (i.e., blindfold them) in order to show how other senses might be made more acute. There are, of course, an endless number of variations to the original perceptual walk, but these are three that can be used as possible suggestions to provide variety from semester to semester.

ATTITUDE CHANGE

The second exercise is one in which students attempt to change the attitudes of other students through an in-class role playing situation. Many marketers feel that attitude change should be the primary goal of promotional strategies. There are a number of studies that clearly document that a

change in attitude, usually prompted by a persuasive campaign, is followed by a behavioral change among large numbers of people [2]. An attitude consists of knowledge about ourselves, our behavior, or our environment. In order to be effective in changing the attitudes of others, an individual should understand those factors which more easily prompt change.

The student is first involved in a discussion of the conditions under which attitude change is likely to occur. This information is based on research findings which are presented to the student. Following is a list, used by the authors, of some of the conditions under which attitude change is more easily accomplished:

1. If little previous information has been available.
2. If the attitude is not central (part of the central structure)
3. If the person is not dogmatic.
4. If the person is younger.
5. If the change attempt occurs over a longer period of time.
6. If the consumer has a poor self image.
7. If the communicator is credible (prestigious, attractive).
8. If the person is female and propaganda is used.
9. If a one-sided argument is used and people are less educated and not initially hostile.
10. If a two-sided argument is used and people are educated or initially hostile.
11. If a fear appeal and then facts are presented, in that order.
12. If there is audience involvement or participation.
13. If emotion can be created.
14. If the conclusions are explicitly stated.
15. If "new" information is offered.
16. If positive reinforcement for the change is offered.
17. If there is strong group pressure.
18. If you overhear a communication or conversation.

After this information is presented and thought about, various students are assigned role playing situations in which they attempt to change or influence the attitudes of another student by using the effective attitude change techniques derived from the list above. Other students act as subjects and try to accurately portray a role which is given to them. Some examples of these role playing situations are shown below:

1. You are a vacuum cleaner salesperson who is trying to change the attitudes of a housewife about your product which you feel is better, but which is also more expensive than many other competing products. Depict a presentation which makes use of as many effective attitude change techniques as possible.
2. You are the manufacturer of a new dog food which is meatier than Alpo and cheaper than Purina Dog Chow.

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What personality would you choose to do an advertisement for this product? Describe the ad that would most effectively change present dog food buyers over to your product.

3. You are talking to a long time smoker who enjoys smoking. Your job is to change his/her attitude toward smoking since you feel that smoking is dangerous to one's health. Which attitude change techniques would you use?
4. You are a salesperson for Ford Motor Company and you specialize in selling full size cars (besides, you make more money on such models). Recently you have noticed that it has been difficult to sell these cars because of the increasing demand for small cars. Depict the appeal you would use on a couple who has just walked into the showroom looking for a new car.
5. You are a salesperson for a company selling word processors. You have already convinced the manager of the secretarial pool that word processors would be much more cost efficient and productive. However, the secretaries are resisting the changeover. Your task is to convince the secretaries to switch from typewriters to word processors.
6. You are the manager of a Jack-In--The-Box outlet. You have just had publicity in all the news media concerning the use of kangaroo meat in your hamburgers. Sales have fallen off drastically. Design a campaign aimed at changing consumers' currently negative attitudes toward your product.

A panel of three other students analyzes the presentation. The presentations last for about ten minutes each. After each presentation the panel, with the aid of the rest of the class, indicates how well the presenter did in trying to change attitudes. In this way all the students are involved in the attitude change process. While actual attitude change would be difficult to accomplish in such a short time period, some students have actually reduced their smoking after participating in such a role playing situation. This exercise results in students learning what conditions are conducive to attitude change and some of the difficulties in actually trying to change another person's attitudes.

Operational Hints

1. This exercise has the best results when good students (intelligent and with good communicative skills) are chosen to be the change agents and the role players. A poor presentation significantly reduces the value of the role playing exercise.
2. Students should be given at least a couple of days to prepare for their roles and to organize their presentations.
3. The three member panel which analyzes each presentation should also consist of some of the best students, since their insight should help prompt class discussion of the appropriate attitude change techniques. An interesting sidelight is to have each one of the panel members introduce themselves as a fictitious person and indicate why they were chosen as an expert on attitude change. The students tend to find this interesting; for instance, one student introduced himself as Sigmund Freud and listed his qualifications as an attitude change expert.
4. It is essential that each panel member and each student prepare a list, prior to the presentations, of which of the eighteen attitude change conditions are reasonably applicable to each of the role playing situations. This

way the discussion after the presentation can focus not only on which attitude change techniques were used, but also which ones were not used that could have been.

5. In the smoking situation it is most effective to find former smokers to act as the change agents, since they are most knowledgeable about the important influences on a smoker. Similarly, in the word processor situation, it is most effective to find former secretaries, since they would understand better the resistance to switch from a typewriter, and therefore which techniques might influence them.
6. As an aid in using this exercise, the following conditions (indicated by number from the list) are most relevant to the following role playing situations:
 1. Vacuum Cleaner - 1, 2, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15, 16, 17
 2. Dog Food 2, 7, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18
 3. Smoker 4, 6, 7, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17
 4. Automobile - 3, 4, 7, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17
 5. word Processor - 3, 5, 7, 10, 12, 14, 15, 16, 17
 6. Hamburger - 1, 4, 7, 10, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17

Variations

While these in-class role playing situations are an effective way to illustrate attitude change techniques, there are some other variations that may also be used.

1. watch religious programs on T.V. on Sunday morning for effective attitude change techniques.
2. Have a team of two students visit a car dealership and analyze the sales presentations of a salesperson in terms of particular attitude change techniques.
3. Read a self-help book and analyze the author's attempts at attitude change.

CONCLUSIONS

The two exercises described in this paper are illustrative of the type of experiential learning that is used in a Consumer Behavior class. However, the concepts and exercises are applicable to Organizational Behavior, Personnel Management, Advertising and other business courses as well. Perception is certainly important in management and attitude change is important in almost any business setting (i.e., accounting, finance, management) when different opinions occur. Above all, the students enjoy and are motivated to learn from these types of experiential exercises.

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