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From Theory to Practice: Applying Marketing Concepts Across Industries in MBA Programs

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Abstract: *Teaching marketing to MBA students, particularly managers from diverse industries, can be greatly enhanced by co-creation with students. Standard teaching methods often fail to demonstrate how to apply theoretical concepts to real-world situations, especially in smaller or resource-limited companies. A study involving 30 MBA students working on real company scenarios revealed that knowledge transfer is more effective when participants co-create strategies and tactics using theoretical models alongside industry-specific examples. For example, some industries benefited from a customer-centric approach using the SAVE model instead of the traditional 4P marketing mix. Industry-specific elements are added to the marketing mix, like internal or sensory marketing, PR, or seasonality. This approach aids in comprehending marketing, showing that flexible, situational strategies enhance understanding and retention, particularly when supported by practical applications. The study suggests that co-creation is a valuable method that can benefit academics and students, enhancing the effectiveness of marketing education.*

1. INTRODUCTION

MBA students, particularly those from diverse industries, often struggle with marketing management because they need to apply it in dynamic and complex environments. These challenges, influenced by industry-specific circumstances and macroenvironmental changes, can impact business performance. The practical application of theoretical models and frameworks is difficult, as they may not seem adaptable to real-world situations across different businesses. Traditional methods of teaching marketing strategy lack a broad perspective, making it hard for students to apply these concepts in constrained or specific industry contexts.

Visual models can effectively facilitate marketing discussions in focus groups, enabling quick transfer of marketing thinking. Conceptual models help simulate scenarios, predict outcomes, and understand complex systems by visualizing variable impacts, guiding the formulation of strategies to address business challenges (Graham et al., 1992). They aid in analyzing environments, identifying strengths and weaknesses, and developing actions to exploit opportunities and mitigate threats. Using real-world company scenarios, these models help illustrate the adaptation of strategies and tactics across industries. Case study learning, supported by these models, enhances strategic thinking and knowledge retention (Graham et al., 1992), with professors and MBA students collaboratively creating educational content (Borba-Salvador et al., 2023).

Therefore, this research aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: Can marketing knowledge be more effectively transferred to diverse MBA participants through a co-creation process in collaboration with the participants?

RQ2: Can participants gain a broader perspective on marketing if they are presented with theoretical models alongside examples of their use in business scenarios from various industries?

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RQ3: Do participants see greater value in the models if presented with examples of their application in business scenarios from different industries?

The paper begins by exploring the co-creation of knowledge and the importance of student feedback. It then outlines the methodology, introducing a strategic and tactical marketing model for management education. Next, it details focus group work and, finally, discussions with 30 MBA students. The results are presented, followed by a discussion on research limitations and recommendations for future studies.

2. CO-CREATION OF KNOWLEDGE AND THE VALUE OF STUDENT FEEDBACK

Many authors discuss the advantages of collaboration and co-creation between business school professors and students (Jayaratne & Mort, 2011; Andersson & Balslev Clausen, 2018; Zarandi et al., 2022; Borba-Salvador et al., 2023). Andersson and Balslev Clausen (2018) and Borba-Salvador et al. (2023) emphasized that traditionally, educators have been seen as knowledge providers. Still, new teaching strategies require the co-creation of knowledge between students and educators, transforming learning into a collaborative process. Peer learning and co-creation of knowledge highlight that learning is not just individual but collective. Deep, shared learning is achieved through cooperation and shared responsibility, especially in Problem-Based Learning, which prioritizes learning over teaching and positions instructors as facilitators and resource persons (Andersson & Balslev Clausen, 2018). Engaging students as active co-creators in their university experience enhances innovation and improves teaching and learning (Zarandi et al., 2022). Students help advance education despite not being experts by contributing their perspectives and feedback. This collaboration benefits institutions by improving pedagogy, reputation, and brand loyalty while enhancing students' skills, critical thinking, and understanding. It fosters emotional connections between students and the institution and allows them to integrate their identities and beliefs into their learning (Zarandi et al., 2022).

Tsourela et al. (2015) also employed peer-to-peer and collaborative learning, where students co-create knowledge and meaning, introducing transformative learning. Smørvik and Vespestad (2020) applied marketing theories to teaching, emphasizing value co-creation. They argue that traditional passive classroom settings are shifting toward deeper learning through problem-solving, discussions, and interactive tasks, positively enhancing students' learning experiences. The experience of active learning during co-creation tends to increase students' motivation to engage in learning and professors' motivation to engage in teaching (Lubicz-Nawrocka & Owen, 2022). Finally, Jayaratne and Mort (2011) concluded that practitioners and educators are responsible for maintaining and advancing the learning community.

Co-creation of knowledge occurs when students provide feedback on theoretical concepts presented in class. They contribute to knowledge development by actively participating in evaluating, critiquing, and improving the content. This process allows students to express their opinions, ask questions, offer suggestions for improvement, and create a shared understanding of the material. The process becomes more interactive and effective by actively evaluating and shaping the presented content, fostering deeper understanding and engagement. This method, in which students provide feedback on theoretical marketing concepts through models of strategic and tactical marketing management presented in class, was used in this study, and a detailed description of the working method follows.

3. METHOD

The sample in this research was a convenience sample consisting of 30 participants from a strategic marketing course in an MBA program within an accredited higher education institution. Participation was voluntary, and students were assured that their involvement would not affect their grades. They were informed that the information and opinions shared in focus group interviews and discussions would contribute to developing future courses. Anonymity was ensured by assigning each student a number in the data presentation. The research was conducted in March 2024 in a classroom. Harrigan and Hulbert (2011) conducted similar qualitative research, and the results of this study are presented in the same manner as they did.

The research was divided into three phases:

- In the first phase, the students were presented with theoretical concepts related to strategic marketing management and corresponding tactical marketing decisions using the model.
- In the second phase, students worked in focus groups on scenarios from various companies.
- In the third phase, each group presented their solutions, followed by a group discussion.

Phase 1 – Presentation of Theoretical Concepts through Visual Model

Participants were introduced to a visual API (A – Analysis, P – Planning, I – Implementation) strategic and tactical marketing thinking model for management education to better convey the overall marketing mindset and theoretical marketing knowledge. The model summarizes the core principles and the interrelationships between the constructs, presented alongside verbal explanations of its components. The model elements were sourced from fundamental marketing textbooks ('introduction to marketing,' 'strategic marketing,' 'marketing management') that are widely used, similar to the work of Harrigan and Hulbert (2011).

The analysis within the model involves continuous primary and secondary market research, examining both the micro-environment (market, company, customers, competitors, suppliers, intermediaries, public) and the macro-environment using the LoNGPESTLE model (where Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Legal, and Environmental/Ecological factors are analyzed in Local, National, and Global contexts).

Planning refers to the strategic planning phases: defining the mission and vision, setting institutional goals, market segmentation and targeting, and determining strategies and strategic positioning. This phase may include tools such as SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis, positioning maps, and BCG (Boston Consulting Group) or GE (General Electric) growth-share matrices. The key questions addressed in this phase are: What are we doing? For whom are we doing it? And how will we achieve it?

Implementation involves the tactical planning phases: determining the marketing mix (4Ps – Product, Price, Place, and Promotion) or 7Ps (adding People, Physical Evidence, and Processes) in the case of service industries. The marketing mix may also include other crucial elements depending on the industry, as this phase addresses the question: Which elements need to be well-designed and executed for the strategy to succeed? Additionally, questions such as who will implement it, when, where, and how much will be spent are answered, culminating in an action plan and budgeting.

After presenting the various components and their interrelationships, where tactics follow strategy and analysis is conducted at the start and continuously due to constant potential environmental changes or goal shortfalls, the next phase demonstrates the application of these concepts through concrete examples.

Phase 2 – Focus Groups

In this research phase, 30 MBA participants were divided into four focus groups, with two groups consisting of seven participants and the other two groups consisting of eight participants. Each group was assigned a real-world scenario from various industries within the B2C market, tasked with developing a strategic and tactical framework to help the company achieve its goals. They were all provided with an identical template, outlining strategic and tactical guidelines, which they used to analyze the company they were studying. The task was to study the specific company and its mission/vision, examine and describe the key factors of the micro and macro environment that influence its operations, conduct a SWOT analysis, and complete the "market/product net," in which the cross-referencing of different market segments and their needs helps to identify the main target segments. Afterward, the group selected one of the proposed strategic models and wrote a positioning statement for the company. Finally, the task was to define and describe the elements of the marketing mix and the necessary activities, with the option to use the SAVE (Solutions-Access-Value-Education) model (Wani, 2013) instead of the 4P model if a highly customer-centric approach was deemed necessary for the business.

The professor supervised the work and posed questions to participants in all four groups, noted their responses, and acted as a moderator to guide the discussion. The entire process lasted two hours. After all the groups completed their tasks, the next phase followed.

Phase 3 – Group Discussion and Wrap-up

Each group presented its work and key conclusions, which lasted one hour and 15 minutes. The others listened and commented during a group discussion, with the professor acting as the moderator. This method of collecting feedback from students in focus groups characterized as an in-depth, open-ended group discussion where specific, predefined, and limited topics are explored, was also used by Roberts (2017), as it provides insights into collective opinions. Additionally, the approach used in this study can be considered an example of the action learning method (Tushman et al., 2007), as it combines theoretical knowledge with practical problem-solving through active participation followed by feedback, allowing for a deeper understanding and application of what is learned.

During the process, it was also important to moderate the discussion to ensure balanced participation across different students and groups. Otherwise, an individual student or part of the group might dominate and lead the discussion (Dollinger et al., 2018).

4. RESEARCH RESULTS

Qualitative data were collected during the research within each focus group, followed by the group discussion. During the discussion, participants concluded that strategy is equally important for all types and sizes of companies and that each must have a unique positioning. A key part of the discussion in each group focused on linking segmentation with the marketing mix, and they concluded that the marketing mix must be adapted to each situation, depending on the type of business and the desired differentiation. The main findings are related to the differences in the marketing mix elements and are presented below.

4.1. Focus Group 1 – The Insurance Company Agram

At the start of the discussion, the group concluded that for the insurance company Agram, it would be more appropriate to use the SAVE model instead of the 4P model, expanded with three additional elements, as the business involves services provided by people, and the credibility of those people and the institution is important. The students also addressed the legal restrictions (macro environment) on advertising in this type of business. They initiated a discussion about the 'promotion' element, which, in their opinion, is not possible in its traditional form.

An interesting dialogue occurred between Student 2 and Student 6, where Student 2 stated that promotion could not be conducted within the marketing mix, while Student 6 remarked: *"We learned that marketing is not just paid advertising, so an unpaid element related to promotional activities could be introduced here."* In further discussion, aided by the professor's moderating questions, the group concluded that the marketing mix for the insurance company Agram should include, alongside 'promotion', the element of 'PR and public relations' and the element of 'internal marketing.'

4.2. Focus Group 2 – The Medical Clinic Bagatin

Since this is a service-oriented healthcare business, the focus group participants chose the SAVE model together with three additional elements for services instead of the classic service elements (7P) in the marketing mix. They also introduced a new element, 'relationship marketing,' for the following reason:

Student 11: *"In healthcare services, trust in doctors is crucial, and developing trust is a key factor. Therefore, it is necessary to work on relationships with patients."*

Student 14: *"Trust is the foundation for patient satisfaction, which will lead to loyalty to the clinic and/or doctor, and patients will either return or recommend the doctor to others."*

In the continuation of the discussion, another element emerged—'personalization'—for the following reason: Student 12: *"Private clinics should differentiate themselves by providing a more personal approach to each patient, and they should strive to create an individual path for everyone, as each person's health problem is different and specific."*

Finally, they commented on aspects that pointed to a new important element in healthcare services, 'sensory marketing':

Student 10: *"Many people are deterred from visiting the doctor due to the smell in clinics and unpleasant sounds. If this is addressed, the appointment cancellation rate could be reduced."*

4.3. Focus Group 3 – The Furniture and Home Goods Retailer IKEA

Despite dealing with the sale of physical products, the group participants concluded that the SAVE model, along with the additional 3Ps for services, would be beneficial in the case of IKEA. This is due to IKEA's competitive advantage through services, as noted in the following comments:

Student 20: *"IKEA also offers consulting services and is known for space-saving furniture. They need to educate people well to provide these additional services."*

Student 17: *"Important parts of their service include the processes to access products. They combine online orders with the ability to pick them up quickly in the store without needing to walk through the store or wait at the checkout."*

Student 21: *"Part of their image includes the store's amenities and atmosphere, from a good restaurant to well-placed, clean restrooms."*

Since the discussion highlighted another important element in the marketing mix, 'atmosphere' was added.

4.4. Focus Group 4 – The Hospitality and Tourism Company Maistra

Given that the business involves all marketing mix elements related to services, the students determined that the starting mix should be 7Ps. Additionally, they identified two crucial elements in the hospitality and tourism industry: 'seasonality' and 'partnership.' These were explained in the discussion as follows:

Student 25: *"There should be stronger partnerships with international travel agencies to bring in more tourists outside the peak tourist season."*

Student 28: *"But to extend the season in hotels, there need to be additional amenities that would attract tourists. For that, it would be necessary to research the desires of target groups and provide accordingly."*

Another important element emerged later in the discussion, 'performance/atmosphere,' emphasized by the following comment:

Student 24: *"In a hotel, the overall experience is crucial. It's not just about what is offered but how it is delivered. The experience can include serving food and drinks and the atmosphere in the hotel. For example, if there are loud young children, there are no romantic moments at dinner. It's important to clearly define the primary target groups and the atmosphere you want to achieve."*

Student 26 added: *"It's also important to properly train staff to deliver the expected level of performance."*

Finally, the group concluded that the SAVE model would be more appropriate for the hospitality and tourism company Maistra than the 4P model.

4.5. Group Discussion and Conclusion

The joint group discussion concluded that the presented theoretical model, with its strategic and tactical elements, can be applied to any company, large or small, and in any industry, with appropriate adaptations. The underlying principles of the model remain consistent, specifically the relationships between different parts of the model and the connections between strategic thinking and tactical decisions. Larger companies can utilize tools like the BCG or GE matrices. At the same time, smaller, family-owned businesses might benefit from tools like SWOT analysis or positioning maps, which can be applied across all scenarios.

Student 19 described his experience working in the group and participating in the discussion: *"The logic connecting strategy and tactics is much clearer to me now. The examples helped with clarity, and everything seems simpler now. Without the examples, I wouldn't have fully understood many things."* Student 6 added: *"It seems like this applies to startups and large corporations. It's just a matter of the scope of work and the number of segments for which marketing mixes are developed."*

5. DISCUSSION

The research has shown that marketing strategy and the marketing mix need to be tailored to each business, company, and industry, a conclusion also reached by Constantinides (2006). In his study, additional elements of the mix, such as 'partnership,' 'performance/atmosphere,' 'PR,' or 'relationship marketing', were mentioned. Rudd and Mills (2008) similarly found that the marketing mix adapts to suit various industries. In service-oriented industries, additional components like 'packaging,' 'partnership,' 'programming,' 'positioning,' and 'people' enhance the marketing mix (Rudd & Mills, 2008).

Specifically, in Focus Group 1 of this study, due to the specifics of the insurance market, students introduced 'PR and public relations' into the marketing mix, considering that advertising is restricted by law. They also added the element of 'internal marketing' because it strengthens internal forces and takes care of influential individuals. When internal marketing is strong, external marketing is also strengthened, which aligns with the findings of Piercy and Morgan (1991).

In Focus Group 2, 'relationship marketing' was identified as an additional element of the marketing mix that needs to be specially designed in line with theoretical frameworks related to many service industries, such as healthcare or education (John & De Villiers, 2022), as highlighted during the group discussion. In healthcare, competitive advantages can also be achieved through good solutions in 'sensory marketing.'

Group 3 emphasized 'relationship marketing' and 'personalization,' often cited in other works on relationship marketing, where the term 'customization' is also mentioned (Constantinides, 2006). In retail, differentiation is often driven by 'atmosphere,' which Oduro and De Nisco (2024) found to be key, noting that it can involve colors, shapes, smells, temperature, and more.

Group 4, concerning the hospitality and tourism industry, identified 'performance/atmosphere,' 'seasonality,' and 'partnership' as crucial elements, findings that are also supported in Constantinides' (2006) study.

This research confirmed that co-creation enhances teaching effectiveness by engaging participants through their input, answering RQ1 by showing that marketing knowledge is better transferred through collaborative processes. Analyzing real business problems helps participants apply frameworks in diverse contexts, addressing environmental complexities and challenges (Graham et al., 1992). Participants also noted that marketing practice requires nuanced application of theory, as theoretical conclusions aren't always directly applicable (Veljković et al., 2024). Thus, RQ2 was answered, as theoretical models and industry examples broaden participants' marketing perspectives.

Jayaratne and Mort (2011) highlighted that effective marketing knowledge involves creative, customized application of information. The research supported this, showing that the model helps students grasp strategic marketing management more efficiently, aligning with Osuagwu's (2016) findings on the value of models. As participants appreciated examples of model application across industries, RQ3 was also addressed.

6. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This study contributes to the marketing education literature by providing an example that can successfully supplement other teaching techniques and generate positive learning outcomes for students, offering them a broader perspective and the opportunity to enhance their understanding of strategic and tactical marketing. Future research could focus on using a different model as the foundation for learning and co-creation with students. Additionally, the research could be expanded by using different companies and industries as examples. Besides qualitative research, more extensive quantitative research could be conducted using a structured questionnaire with a larger sample.

7. CONCLUSION

Teaching methods should be adapted to students, and marketing education needs to be connected with current practices. Additionally, it is important to engage students through co-creation and to help them link theoretical perspectives with specific contexts (Borba-Salvador et al., 2023). Participants perceive greater benefit from acquired knowledge after group work on scenarios of companies from various industries, where theoretical concepts and frameworks are used. These concepts apply to all scenarios, provided adaptations suit the specific situation. Also, the discussion conducted in the research led to the following conclusions regarding strategic and tactical marketing plans:

- Both macro and micro environments significantly impact strategy and tactics.
- A company's size influences the overall marketing plan and the tools employed.
- For customer-centric business solutions, the SAVE model (Solutions-Access-Value-Education) is often more effective than the traditional 4P marketing mix (Product-Price-Place-Promotion).
- Some businesses can build their strategies around a single marketing mix element, such as 'relationship marketing,' if that element proves to be crucial for differentiation and, ultimately, for business success.
- Industry-specific factors may require a focus on tactical elements like 'sensory marketing,' 'internal marketing,' 'atmosphere,' 'PR,' 'seasonality,' and similar. Therefore, it is necessary to study the environment, consider customer needs, and expand the mix with the required elements.

If managers adopt a flexible approach, adapting strategic and tactical frameworks to specific situations, they can better absorb marketing concepts and apply MBA-acquired knowledge. This flexibility also helps small and medium-sized enterprises overcome resource constraints. The study's limitations include its reliance on a single professor's model and a convenience sample, which may affect perspectives. Despite this, the findings offer valuable insights for marketing academics, educators, and managers.

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