The Journal of Marketing Education is replete with articles that emphasize real-world experience and simulations as good ways to introduce students to problems they are likely to face in employment situations. Nevett (1985) advocates real work experience to narrow the gap between learning and doing. Goretsky (1984) argues that undergraduates need to be exposed to classroom activities that parallel those that they are likely to encounter in their first jobs. He recommends relevant class projects as a way to give students this hands-on experience. Goldgehn and Soares (in press) encourage marketing educators to assign group and individual projects that can help graduating students demonstrate competence in their specialty fields. Lantos and Butany (1985) consider class projects a good way to give students a "taste of the real world."

A good way to give marketing research students a taste of the real world is through group "taste test" projects. In spite of the fact that most marketing research texts devote little space to taste test research, the taste test is becoming a popular research method, as evidenced by the fast food hamburger wars and the Coca-Cola reformation. Taste test research is used to compare products. Favorable taste test results are often used in advertising, and unfavorable data serve as input for product modification or reformulation.

Why Teach Taste Tests?

In addition to its current popularity as a research tool, the taste test also encompasses key aspects of the marketing research process: information needs are established; secondary data are collected and analyzed; research questions and hypotheses are stated; sampling procedures are set; primary data collection methods are determined; behavioral measurements are developed; field work procedures are designated and then executed; data are edited, analyzed, and interpreted; and a final report is written and presented orally. In other words, the primary features of marketing research are realized through the use of taste tests. But taste tests go beyond descriptive studies such telephone surveys.

Taste tests examine causal relationships among dependent and independent variables. The taste test is quasi-experimentation research. This introduces more rigor into the study than is normally given to descriptive studies such as in survey research. In addition to accounting for or controlling error present in descriptive research, the student must also deal with factors that jeopardize the internal and external validity of the study (see Campbell and Stanley 1966). Plus, students must construct a cover story or preamble, control for extraneous variation (such as order effects, experimenter expectations, halo effects, Hawthorne effects, boom-
Determine dependent variables. Decide how taste preferences will be measured (e.g., via observation of behavior, paired product comparisons, voice pitch analysis, pupil dilation, rating scales).

Determine how independent variables will be operationalized and manipulated. Decide how many variables will be used, and how many levels of each variable are appropriate.

Determine sampling plan. Define the population that results will be generalized to. Determine a sample selection procedure, sample size criteria, and treatment group assignment.

Determine data analysis procedures. Set up a computer codebook, data editing procedure, and dummy figures and hypothesis tests.

Construct experimental plan. Compose a cover story, instructions, activities, subjects will do, manipulation check, and debriefing. Secure equipment, experimental site, human subjects review board permission, the product being tested, and ancillary supplies. Plan for treatment assignment, control group activities, back-up procedures, control of experimental artifacts, and training of experimenters. Rehearse all activities.

Perform the experiment. Monitor and record all activities that occur during the experiment. Ensure that the experimental plan is followed.

Perform the data analysis. Follow the data analysis plan. Edit, code, analyze, and interpret data.

Construct the written report. Include a title page, table of contents, executive summary, introduction, methods, findings, limitations, conclusions, recommendations, appendices. Insert appropriate figures and tables.

Video tape oral presentation. Have each group member report on an aspect of the study. Limit the presentation to ten minutes per project.

The Diet Cola Taste Test

To illustrate the twelve stages, a summary of a student project comparing diet colas as described. After learning about taste test research, the class was divided into five groups of seven people each. They selected a leader, a "company" name, and a topic. Topics were selected by brainstorming and with instructor approval of appropriateness.

1. The authors wish to thank the students in the Marketeers research group: Mark Andrade, Andy Davis, Brian Duhe, Robert Jackson, Craig James, Dave Larsen, and Tina Yerko.
the taste test before participating. The experiment was conducted over the course of one day. The experimental plan was carried out as determined. All known jeopardizing factors to the experiment were recorded and mentioned in the written and oral report.

After compiling, editing, and entering the data, the aforementioned statistical analyses were executed. In their report, the students noted that a repeated measures analysis of variance test showed that there was a significant difference among colas regarding respondents' taste ratings. Correlated t-tests pinpointed the difference between the diet cola mean; the Diet Coke mean rating was significantly higher than all the others; none of the other mean ratings differed significantly from the others. Using oneway analysis of variance tests, the group found that females rated diet coke significantly higher than did males. There were no other significant differences. The research group concluded that Diet Coke was rated number one overall, and that females preferred it more than males did. They recommended that Shasta emphasize its competitive price advantage and not its superior taste. Of course, they also recommended that more taste tests be completed. They were thorough in discussing the limitations of their findings (such as: lack of random selection and assignment, no control group, no use of paired comparisons or other rankings, small sample size). Students put copies of the written report and videotape of their presentation in their portfolios.

Taste tests are worth doing, in spite of the difficult logistics involved. They are interesting and allow students to learn the scientific method in a practical setting. Instructors should try other experimental projects, such as ad testing, limited test marketing, and replicating experiments from marketing journals. The key is to expose students to actual experience. This will let them apply the theories and techniques learned in class to the real world—and will show prospective employers that students can do real work.

References


Conclusions

Taste tests are an intriguing yet rigorous way to provide students with practical experience in conducting marketing research. All the elements of a research course are included in the project. A few caveats: a taste test project consumes a great deal of the professor's and students' time. The dynamics involved in group problem-solving can become intense. Grading individual performance can be difficult. There is the possibility of fudging, contamination, carelessness, procrastination, and whining. Finally, taste tests cost money.

The good news is that instructors can account for these pitfalls with proper planning and training. The instructor needs to inform students at the beginning of the term about the time demands that the project will require. The project should begin by the third week of class. The instructor should give a lecture on group dynamics and explain the benefits of task orientation.

Grading should be done by assigning points to the written report and the oral presentation. All group members share this grade. Then, the instructor should award points for individual contributions by having students write a summary of what they did on the project—and have them rank their performance relative to the performance of the other members. Costs can be shared by the students and the instructor. Sometimes companies will sponsor the research; this will help defray costs.