

Involvement of Students in Experimental In-store Research Projects

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Abstract

In the field of business education, the issue of how many practical skills we can teach students and in what way we can do this has been an ongoing problem. In our modern world, it is essential for students to adopt a ‘learning by doing’ attitude as early as their undergraduate years and enter the labour market having useful insights into business. It is of particular significance for students in business sectors to understand the practical considerations of methodology, as a result, they should be involved in the research practices of the branch of science they have chosen to study. The aim of this research, besides supporting the practice of business education, is to explore how to describe consumer behaviour in in-store situations. Therefore, this paper is composed of two parts: one of them describes the background and methods of the research project, while the other presents an applied business education case.

Keywords: Business education, consumer behaviour, field study, practice in research

Introduction

As R. Casidy says, universities and business schools “should strive to engage in market-oriented activities to remain competitive in the increasingly competitive education environment. (2014, p.162.)” In the field of business education, a number of institutions at the moment fail to provide students with adequate practical experience that is indispensable for obtaining useful practical knowledge. The labour market, however, demands practice-oriented students who, if faced with a real problem at their workplace, have the right knowledge to start seeking solutions. The only way for them to obtain a firm basis is to internalise what has been taught to them in theory through experience. It is very important as early as their undergraduate years that education management organisations should pay special attention to use a ‘learning by doing’ approach to education. The introduction of dual education is a practice-oriented methodological

experiment in the higher education development programme started in Hungary. The aim is to increase the number of training programmes that provide useful and valuable professional practice opportunities. The training programmes enable students to spend 3 months a year at a cooperating company, where they can be involved in the activities of the firm and have the chance to gain the soft skills such enterprises require.

Within the scope of subjects taught, teachers are in many cases guided towards the ‘easy solution’ and education is carried out primarily through an in-depth analysis of theory, let alone the fact that this is considered to be a less costly solution. Thus, during the time available for practice, students face real-life issues only in case studies, despite the fact that engagement in practice ensures a much greater motivation for understanding.

As L.Vos posits,...”considerable research findings have demonstrated the value of simulations in motivating and engaging students and in developing their skills and competencies. (2015, p.57.)” It is important to emphasize that a pool of teachers having the required competencies and experience should be maintained in higher education. Several authors have touched upon this issue in their writings. In connection with the situation in Hungary, I would like to highlight the article titled ‘About Limits to Globalised Teaching Methodologies’. (Z. Veres, L. Józsa,2005.) The authors claim that, ...”one of the major obstacles of practice-oriented teaching is that it requires teachers with practical experience.” Institutions should be aware of the demands of the labour market and develop practical plans, in addition to using an efficient assessment system, that oriented to the practice and concerns professional contexts.(Brown, 2004. p. 83-84.)

Example of practice-oriented subject management

In consideration of the needs of the labour market, we, at the Marketing Institute of the University of Pannonia, show a preference for using experimental research to teach the professionals of the future on the basis of a ‘learning by doing’ approach. This is especially important in the field of marketing, for this is where multidimensional issues occur with great frequency, therefore, one can be efficient in this profession only if we provide students with a chance to gain an insight into real processes. A marketing expert must know what is in the consumers’ heads, what influences their shopping behaviour and what motivates them to have preferences. Within the scope of the Scientific Research Programme³ started

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at the Marketing Institute, we test the research modules with the involvement of students. Students join the Programme through their marketing seminars. The research program was centred on a multi-step in-store research carried out in a real shopping environment. The data collection phase was completed together with our students. Thus, the students, as subjects to the research, could make themselves familiar with the research process on the basis of their experiences. By teaching students on the basis of their own experience, they can have a better understanding, comprehension and acquisition of what has been taught in theory.

The research design was developed by the teachers of the Marketing Institute of the University of Pannonia. The aim of the research is to study the development of consumer preferences before, after and during the shopping process. We want to observe how consumers' choice decisions are related to their interactions and how in-store stimuli effects can influence the purchasing decision. It is a well-known fact that the shopping environment can have a significant impact on consumer decisions. Higher number of shoppers re influenced by instore conditions, the installing is chock-full with marketing and POS materials. (McGoldrick, Betts, and Keeling 1999). According to Foxall and Goldsmith the physical environment motivate the curiosity of the buyers. These can be extra displays, price tags, sale signage and specific messages etc...that "all likely to directly affect consumer behaviour (1994.)"

They had preliminary information on the research projects during their lessons. The data collection phase of the research was completed within the scope of seminars. As a result, the students could try the research methods learnt at theoretical lectures themselves.

The design is complex and consists of various research methods, such as pre-tested questionnaire surveys, eye-tracking surveys and a post-experiment qualitative research. In order to get a deeper understanding of in-store choice decisions, the research focus is on buyers interactions in the store. "In-store gaze behaviour is of key importance in situational buying intention. (Wästlund et al. 2015.)" Data collection was implemented in three stages in 2015. We explored buyers' explicit preferences of four types of products (soft drinks, beers, sweets and milk products) in an online questionnaire survey among students. We asked them what their main preferences were in the given 4 product segments and how they ranked them. The second stage was an in-store experiment in a specific retail food store (see Figure 1). Before starting their shopping tour, they had to put on an 'eye camera'. Thus they had the chance to examine the operating mechanism of the camera as well as the images taken and could also take part in the calibration process. The camera followed the customers' shopping trip and observed customer behaviour: when, what and how long they were looking

at (Figure 2.) and what the influential factors were. They had to choose one product from each category according to their normal buying habits. We investigated the preferences in the store and how customers use in-store signs to navigate and make decisions. The survey lasted for three days. Regarding eye-tracking, we estimated an average of 20 usable trackings a day. After the in-store eye-tracking survey, we conducted an interview among the students (third stage of the research), where we asked them about their buying decisions with respect to the four types of products. During the survey, we tried to study individual behaviours by identifying students and their answers. The object of the study is not to identify general statements but to set up a classification of behaviours. The above review suggests that there are some unknown territories yet to be discovered. The research examined primarily the cognitive and perceptual elements of buying decisions, as a consequence, the exploration of the emotional dimension of consumer behaviour is limited.

Conclusion

Regarding the application of the results of this research in education, by investing 4 days of class time, we have managed to present the students with several research methodologies efficiently used in the profession. The engagement of students provides them with useful practical experience and is advantageous in terms of research costs, since the recruitment of participants involved in the research means further costs in general. In addition, we can make observations on the consumption behaviour of the target group of students, which can provide useful research output in the segment concerned. One of the drawbacks is that its validity is limited, since the target group is greatly restricted. The entire sample is limited to a specified age group and education level, as a consequence, it is not representative of other consumers with different demographic characteristics. The fact that the students take part in the training programme and study the methodologies used leads to further distortion of the results because there is a chance that they do not behave as ordinary consumers. Another problem may arise if they consider practice as an obligation and want to complete it as quickly as possible, as a result, they do not show their real preferences in the shopping situation. As a summary of the education-related experience of the research: on the basis of feedback received from the students, we can say that they found this opportunity positive and useful. It was a great motivation for their preparations, for they could have their own real-life experience of something they had discussed 'only' in theory. Based on our current experience, the involvement of students in the data processing phase, in addition to the implementation of the research, may provide further opportunities in the future. In this respect, they could also have a chance to interpret research

results. This is an extremely important consideration for efficient professional training because when they enter the labour market and have similar problems in real life, they will already be experienced with research reports. For the marketing profession, it is of utmost significance to train experts who are not only up-to-date in theoretical issues but also have a useful insight into practice. For this, they need to face real-life situations within the context of educational programmes and leave the university with a knowledge that can serve as a firm basis for their careers.

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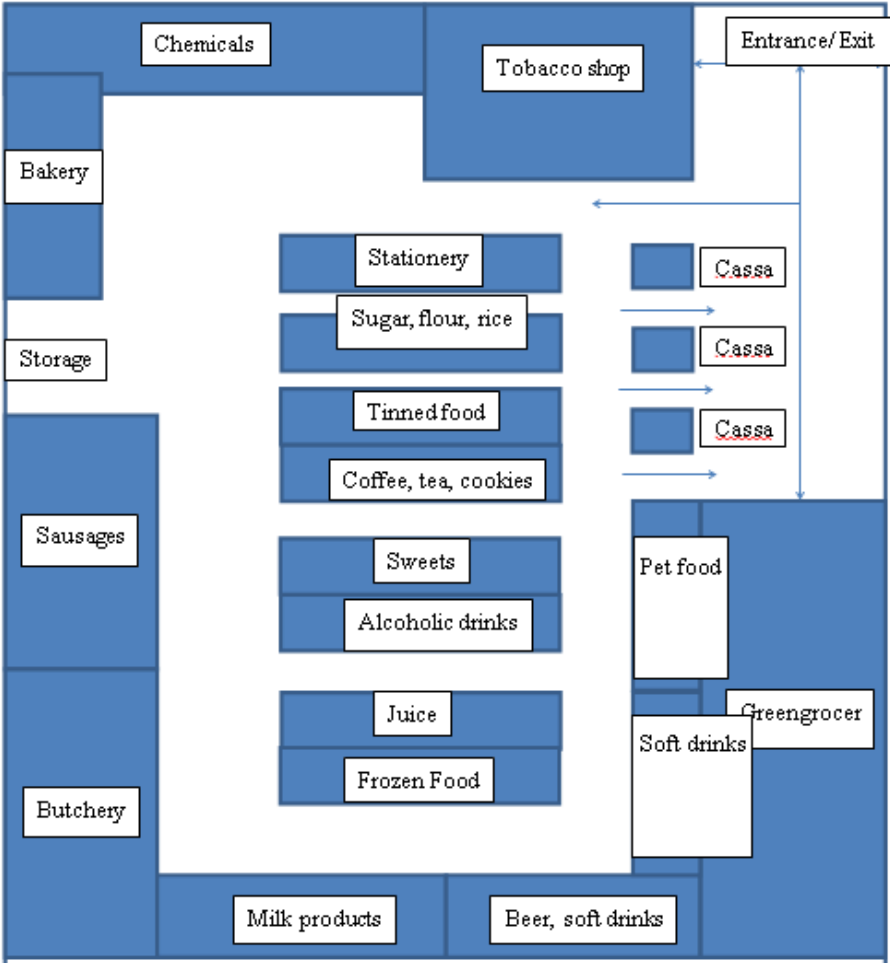
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Figures:

• Figures 1: Layout of the store



• Figures 4: Heatmap of sweets gazing

