

HELPING STUDENTS OF MARKETING DEAL WITH ETHICS: A NEW PEDAGOGY

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Business schools are criticized today for failing to prepare their students to deal with ethical issues in the marketplace. Recent insider-trading abuses, particularly ones involving so-called "fast-track kids," along with the more recent public accusations of unethical practices in the deeply troubled savings and loan industry, have heightened public insistence that more be done in terms of the moral development of business students. This article describes a novel method - popular films in video-cassette form - for teaching ethics to students of marketing.

Counterfeit goods or "knockoffs" are one of several perplexing ethical problems that beset the marketplace today. Others that come to mind include dumping, bribing, product tampering, skimming, and software bootlegging, not to mention expense padding and "rip off's." It is beyond the scope of this article to attempt a full explanation as to why marketers and others are faced on all sides by such difficult moral issues. Even so, it may be that some inability to deal with moral issues derives from sheer ignorance of first-order principles of ethics. Notwithstanding major advances in business science, ignorance of ethical principles as they apply to marketing activities is commonplace. Ethics professor Gerald Cavanagh could not be more direct: "most of us have a child's notion of ethics and a graduate-school notion of finance, marketing, and management" (*U.S. News and World Report* 1985). More recently this view has been re-affirmed by W. Michael Hoffman, founding director of the Center for Business Ethics at Bentley College.

It seems that the acceptance of the phrase "business ethics" and our present emphasis on ethics in general resulted from a moral crisis created by our inadequate philosophical development (*Business Insights* 1989).

This paper has three main parts. In the first part, an exposition of a core principle in the teaching of ethics to marketing students is undertaken. In the second part, a novel method for reinforcing the teaching of the core principle is presented. In the third part, some films that appear to be appropriate for teaching ethics in marketing are suggested. This paper proceeds from the dual principles that thought precedes action and that knowledge is virtue.

CONVENTIONAL PEDAGOGY

The conventional pedagogy for teaching ethics to marketing students reduces to a single instructor, using a standard marketing textbook and teaching by the lecture method. The ethics component typically consists of a single chapter entitled "Marketing and Society" or the like (Pamental 1987). The topic often is given only superficial coverage. In some instances, it is left out entirely. Cases may be utilized to set forth the ethical issues in need of resolution. Sometimes, the students are instructed in ethical principles which become the

analytical tools for addressing the issues that have been presented to them through the cases. At times, the instruction is grounded in moral relativism and values clarification. In general, classes are large, students are passive note-takers and their competencies are measured by standard in-class exams and, in some cases, by term papers.

One of the main advantages of the conventional pedagogy is that it can accommodate a large number of students at one time. For some students, this method works effectively in the sense that they acquire valuable skills in addressing ethical problems. There are, however, at least three main disadvantages.

First, the teaching proceeds entirely on the intellectual level. Students are not afforded an opportunity to deal with marketing questions on the emotional level, the motivational level, or the imaginative level.

Second, students are not required to first discern the ethical problems at hand; the case presents it to them directly in a neat package. Our review of the business-ethics literature suggests a presumption by business school instructors to the effect that ethical misconduct is evidence of a weakness in moral character—thus the wide affirmation of the need for strong ethical role models at the senior-management level and of codes of ethical conduct. At the same time, it appears that a deficiency of skills in discernment—a specific type of weakness in intelligence—is overlooked as a factor contributing to the problem of unethical behavior in the business world.'

Third, students are not exposed to the complicated intertwining of issues and principles that frequently characterize ethical problems in general. Nor are they experienced as to the type and the extent of the personal risks that taking and holding an ethical position sometimes entail.

NEW PEDAGOGY

An alternative to the conventional approach has been developed that uses a team teaching technique and the seminar method. Instead of a standard textbook, award-winning films such as *Save the Tiger* and *Death of a Salesman* are employed to present ethical problems in need of resolution. From the very beginning of the course the students are instructed in certain ethical principles that help them identify, define, and come to grips with specific ethical issues. The films contain the case studies that conventionally are presented via the print medium.

The class meets for a three-and-one-half-hour period one day per week over a ten-week quarter. Two films are discussed in every weekly class period. The films are designated in

the syllabus by week and students are instructed to view them before the class meets. The films are on reserve at the university audio-visual center where equipment and a viewing room are set aside for the students' exclusive use. The films may be rented in video-cassette form through specialized retail outlets or bought (used or new) from the same outlets. Two other sources are general merchandise stores and specialized mail-order houses. The films are much more convenient to store, transport, and use in video-cassette form than in 16mm form. In addition, the video cassettes are much less expensive. Some cost less than \$10; the most expensive one cost approximately \$80.

During the quarter, 16 films are used as case studies and are presented to the students in order of the complexity of the ethical issues involved. In effect, the student progresses from cases that are ethically "black and white" to ones that are more nearly "grey." Between quarters, films are added and deleted from the list of 16 as better video materials are discovered or become available.

Each student is required to view and prepare beforehand written abstracts of the two films that are scheduled for that week and to submit their abstracts at the beginning of the class period. In their abstracts, the students are expected to focus on the ethical issues and principles involved, any ethical dilemmas that arise, and how those problems are resolved in the film. To illustrate, *Save the Tiger* is the story of a desperate apparel manufacturer with a very serious cash-flow problem who considers and employs various schemes to survive, including the procuring of a prostitute for a key buyer. The written abstracts are returned one week later with comments by the instructors. This discernment phase is referred as "sizing up the ethical situation."

Critics of business-ethics instruction frequently argue that ethical conduct cannot be taught to university students because their moral standards have been formed at a much earlier age and are not likely to be changed especially in a class where the subject is covered in a single lecture. There is, no doubt, substance to this charge. However, our experience indicates that students do not apply whatever ethical standards they already have until they have identified and defined that there is an ethical problem requiring some resolution. Discernment in ethical questions is the equivalent of diagnosis in personal medical matters.

All 16 films are stories that engage students variously on the four levels of intelligence, emotion, imagination, and motivation. As stated earlier, the conventional pedagogy utilizes only the first of these our levels. Storytelling is a time-honored way of teaching ethics, especially to youngsters. Stories about such mythical characters as Lancelot, Fat Albert, and Wonder Woman, and such real persons as Abe Lincoln, George Washington, and Martin Luther King are morality plays. The moral lessons are imprinted on the young precisely because the stories are so fascinating that they create their own teachable

moment.

Another very closely-related reason for the effectiveness of films is that each one has at least one principal character who serves as an ethical role model. Notice, for example, Karen in *Silkwood* (positive model) and Harry in *Save the Tiger* (negative model), both of whom demonstrate that ethics is a flesh-and-blood matter of resolving ethical conflicts in ways that may be personally dangerous and even life-threatening. This aspect of the moral question typically is missing when instruction proceeds conventionally.

A 1988 report on corporate ethics by the Business Roundtable underscores the significance of role models in the world of commerce and industry. In the experience of these companies with regard to corporate ethics, no point emerges more clearly than the crucial role of top management. To achieve results, the Chief Executive Officer and those around the CEO need to be openly and strongly committed to ethical conduct, and give constant leadership in tending and renewing the values of the organization. Companies find it necessary to communicate the commitment in a variety of ways-in directives, policy statements, speeches, company publications, and *especially in actions* (Business Roundtable 1988; emphasis added).

Recently, William F. May, former chairman and chief executive officer of American Can Company, re-affirmed the pivotal role of the CEO:

The chief executive officer has a unique responsibility: He's a role model. What he does, how he lives, and the principles under which he operates become pretty much those the rest of the corporation emulates (*Across the Board* 1988).

The conventional pedagogy using printed case studies in marketing does not provide reinforcement for the centrality of the role model. The new pedagogy does and in that sense is a closer approximation of the real world. To further reinforce the importance of role models, every student is asked during the final class period to name the most compelling positive role model and negative role model encountered in viewing and discussing the 16 films.

The quality of the acting performances, in addition to the story itself and the ethical topics raised, are the three principal norms for selecting films for the course. Formidable acting performances make for convincing role models and help imprint certain ethical lessons. Note in this regard the lessons for marketing students from the behavior of the principals in *The Tin Men*.

In a May 1988 conference on business ethics sponsored by The Conference Board, Harvard University professor Barbara Ley Toffler employed a similar pedagogy which is described in the conference brochure:

Many companies now include sessions on ethics in training programs for people at all levels of the company. The management challenge is to develop programs that aren't boring examinations of esoteric philosophies. An ETHICS TRAINING SAMPLER is your chance to experience a dynamic ethics training session, one that uses material directly related to business and is not another case study or lecture. Barbara Ley Toffler, a leading teacher and author on business ethics, will take you through a training session using excerpts from Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and Studs Terkel's *Working*, each portrayed by first-rate Broadway actors, as the focus of these discussions (The Conference Board 1988).

Clearly Toffler's "training sampler" presents certain financial and logistical barriers for the regular classroom teacher. Additionally, it appears to skirt the problem of discernment.

Students are graded on the basis of their written abstracts, classroom discussion, and final exam. The final is a take-home exam that is made up of several essay questions each of which presents an ethical issue or dilemma in need of resolution. Included are some questions relating to discernment in which the student is required to view one or two films (not from the 16 used during the course) which were not discussed during the preceding weeks.

The students have one week to prepare their answers. Their papers are submitted during the final class period where each question is addressed in turn. The students are required to grade their own responses directly on their papers. Later, grades on the final exam are assigned by the instructors who evaluate the answers primarily on the student's ability to articulate an ethically defensible position.

CENTRAL PRINCIPLES

The opening period of the course is a lecture on three major sources of moral standards: authority (including faith), emotion, and reason. The first is external to the individual; the second and third are internal. Of the three sources, reason is emphasized on grounds that thought should precede action and that, properly understood, the university is neither a seminary nor a counseling center.

During this opening session, students view a one-hour documentary on corruption in New York City government. This documentary drives home the point that action conditions thought; in this case, the outcome is the widespread acceptance of grossly unethical practices. The students also take a ten-item set of questions on ethical issues that provides a crude estimate of the student's ethical development at the outset.

The first-period lecture also presents three central principles of ethical conduct. Those principles are distributive justice, contributive justice, and equivalence. Other principles are introduced at the appropriate time as the course unfolds (see the appendix for a listing of some of the principles which we have found to be instructive throughout the course).

Distributive justice, contributive justice, and equivalence set forth what is owed in three key relationships: superior to subordinates, individual to group, and individual to individual. Distributive justice regulates the relationship between the person with superior responsibilities and his or her subordinates. In the workplace a common expression for distributive justice is that the employer owes the employee "equal pay for equal work." A salesperson who earns a much smaller commission than all other sales personnel with the same sales record may be fully justified in complaining of being treated unfairly (under distributive justice). This principle specifies the extent of economic justice in the activities of private organizations and public institutions relative to their members or constituents. In considerable measure, distributive justice focuses on marketing management and its relationship with the firm's various constituents.

Contributive justice regulates the relationship between individual and the groups to which they belong. As with distributive justice, the obligation imposed is one-sided. Under distributive justice the manager has a duty to subordinates to treat them in some equal fashion. Under contributive justice, the individual has a duty to support and maintain any group from which benefits are received. "Paying one's dues" or contributing one's fair share" are simple ways of giving expression to contributive justice. With regard to the application of this principle on the ethics of marketing, note in particular inside sales information and insider trading.²

It is the principle of equivalence that instructs most persuasively in matters of ethical concern in marketing. This principle sets forth the mutual obligation of buyer to seller. Each party has a two-part obligation to the other. For an exchange to be fair or just, buyer and seller are obliged to (1) exchange things of equal value and (2) impose equal burdens on one another. In the marketplace, a violation of the principle of equivalence on occasion is called "a ripoff." Specific violations include "knockoffs" or counterfeiting of merchandise, price gouging, inflated credit sales, and foreign trade dumping.

Counterfeiting violates the first condition of the principle because the things being exchanged are not of equal value. Inflated credit sales violate the second condition. Interest is justified generally as a way of equalizing the burden between the seller who must finance the item at the time of the sale and the buyer who does not have to pay the full purchase price until sometime later. The violator of truth in lending abuses the principle of equivalence by imposing a grossly unequal interest burden on the borrower. Because such violations are regarded as unethical, typically they are condemned as illegal as well.

These three principles are indispensable tools for addressing ethical questions and dilemmas. The reason is that the economy is a human system which depends critically on individuals entering into and fulfilling their obligations to one another. A marketplace where central obligations are ignored or dismissed breaks down and becomes disorderly, contentious, inefficient, and dangerous. Counterfeiters, embezzlers, inside traders, loan sharks, tin men, and the like find it to their personal advantage to shuck their obligations. In so doing, they tear asunder the human relationships and associations that are necessary for the orderly, peaceful, efficient, and safe transformation of resources into goods and services and the distribution, exchange, and final consumption of those goods and services. Trade is reciprocal and repetitive. It cannot continue unless the parties involved are trustworthy which means that they are meeting their obligations to each other.

All three principles are given expression in the Code of Ethics of the American Marketing Association. Table 1 shows the six items that make up that Code and the corresponding principle(s) involved. The principles of justice in effect provide some additional detail as to the various obligations that marketers accept when they become members of the Association.

ADAPTING THE COURSE TO THE NEEDS OF MARKETING STUDENTS

There are three main modalities by which the foregoing pedagogy may be used in teaching ethics to students of marketing. The first modality teaches marketing ethics in the context of general ethical problems. This option presents marketing ethics as one of many types of ethical concerns and exposes the marketing student to the moral views of students with other professional or career interests.

The second modality is to teach marketing ethics in a course that centers on business ethics problems. The second option has a narrower focus than the first but allows for a deeper penetration of ethical problems in the marketplace.

The third modality is to cover ethical problems in marketing in a course where perhaps two or three class periods are set aside for ethics in marketing and a like number of films are employed. This option could utilize the team-teaching approach with the marketing instructor and the ethics specialist sharing the instructional burden or with the ethicist as the primary instructor and the marketing instructor serving as a resource.

Selection of the right films turns critically on the modality used and the specific issues one wants to pursue in the classroom. In a very important sense, no specific set of films will work effectively in every classroom. Even so, the following eight are suggested because they probe questions of special interest to students of marketing:

Save the Tiger

Tin Men

Tucker

Days of Wine and Roses

Silkwood

A Man for All Seasons

All the King's Men

Wall Street

Save The Tiger and *Tin Men* are so directly focused on certain marketing problems that both are highly recommended. The first addresses the problem of compromising contributive justice (through juggling the books for tax-evasion purposes and "torching" an insured property) in order to survive. The second demonstrates how the principle of equivalence is violated through a careful blending of lies and customer manipulation.

Tucker is an effective demonstration as to how general commitments made by the manufacturer before the product is ready for distribution may be compromised (following the principle of equivalence) because of engineering and production problems. *Days of Wine and Roses* raises the issue as to the limits that the principle of equivalence imposes on the employer in making demands on his employees (in this instance, a public relations specialist) and on the employee in his personal conduct as it relates to representing the firm.

Silkwood forces the student to confront the question of the employee's obligation under equivalence to her employer and under contributive justice to her co-workers and their community in a situation where the product being manufactured is defective and poses a threat to the health of others who use it or live near any facility that might use it. In *A Man For All Seasons* distributive justice is addressed in the form of the problem of the

"facilitating payment." This film shows how difficult it may be for a person with superior responsibilities to refuse a "gift" even when it is offered in public. In *All the King's Men* students are alerted to the problem of the publicist who must choose between loyalty to his employer (a governor, in this case) and his duty under contributive justice to the citizens of the state.

Wall Street brings to the fore the difficulty in meeting the demands of contributive justice where the individuals achieving the greatest personal financial success disregard their obligations to the group entirely. W. Ann Reynolds, Chancellor of the 19-campus California State University system, refers to the central character of this film, Gordon Gekko, in a way that suggests an educator's perspective that is quite different from ours. Reynolds appears to warn that sensational material of the type one encounters in popular films is not a reliable resource in teaching ethics to business students (see *Business Insights* 1989).

Our experience indicates that the central problem in using such materials is that the students become absorbed in the story and lose track of the specifics of the ethical issues that are embedded in the story. In other words, they tend to reduce ethical analytics to storytelling. Whatever films are selected,³ the instructor(s) must carefully prepare for the discussion that the films evoke. It is imperative that the students first be directed toward the discernment issue and that they be required to identify the relevant ethical principles.

The discussion necessarily is free-wheeling especially at the start of the course before the students have become familiar with these principles as analytical tools. More than anything else, it is the application of these principles that provides structure to the course and allows the students to draw conclusions that are defensible. To reinforce that outcome, every student is asked at the end of each class to state what moral lesson has been learned from the discussion. As the course unfolds, the moral lessons become analytically more sophisticated.

FINAL COMMENTS

Films transcend certain boundaries or limits that case studies frequently do not. The marketing student, for example, may be transported outside 20th century U.S. to Nazi-dominated Europe, Victorian England, pre-World War n Mexico, or early 16th Century England. The films provide valuable history lessons. More significantly, however, the student sees some of the same ethical conflicts in different places, times, and cultures. This serves to heighten his awareness that conflict of this kind transcends such boundaries, that it is embedded deeply in the human condition, and will not fade away in the student's lifetime. In other words, the films help bring the student of marketing closer to the

realization that the issue is not so much whether conflicting moral values will be encountered in the marketplace but how those conflicts are to be resolved.

Two central requirements must be put in place for a reasoned resolution of an ethical conflict: the *intelligence* to discern the precise issues involved and to select and apply the proper ethical principles and the *will* to follow through with an appropriate action even when it may be personally dangerous or repulsive.

While it probably is true that ethical conduct cannot be taught to young adults whose ethical standards already have been formed, it is possible and important to teach skills of discernment without which ethical behavior reduces to patterning one's conduct after an authority figure or role model or to following one's emotions. Expecting a mature person to behave ethically in business affairs without first enhancing his skills of discernment is the equivalent of expecting a medical student to treat a patient successfully with only rudimentary skills of diagnosis. Following the same line of thought, as central as the Hippocratic Oath is to the ethical practice of medicine, the Oath is no substitute for diagnostic training. Neither is an authority figure such as Marcus Welby an adequate replacement for such training.

Discernment is an essential requirement for a reasoned outcome of an ethical problem and a complement in such an enterprise to a role model or a code of ethics. Helping marketing students address ethical conflicts by improving their skills of discernment should be a requirement in every marketing curriculum. Without those skills, graduates may not recognize when they have become entangled in an ethical crisis until it is too late.

APPENDIX

SOME PRINCIPLES FOR TEACHING ETHICS TO MARKETING STUDENTS

Principle of Equivalence

This principle sets forth the mutual obligation of the buyer and the seller in the marketplace and the employer and the employee in the workplace. Both parties have the same obligations: (1) to exchange things of equal value and (2) to impose equal burdens on one another. Any failure with regard to one or the other obligation by either party makes for an exchange that violates justice. "Knockoffs" are a violation of the principle of equivalence.

Principle of Distributive Justice

This principle sets forth the obligation of the person with superior responsibilities to those who are his or her subordinates. The superior's duty under distributive justice is to see that the burdens and the benefits are distributed among subordinates in some equal fashion. This principle is violated whenever the superior plays favorites or discriminates along such lines as sex, age, religion, race, national origin.

Principle of Contributive Justice

This principle sets forth the obligation of the individual to the group (whether the group is private, public, small, or large). Insofar as the individual derives benefits from belonging to the group, he or she has an obligation to maintain and support that group. A violator sometimes is called a "deadbeat," a "showboat," or a "freeloader."

Principle of Private Property

A person has a right to what is created with their own hands or mind.

Principle of Association

Persons of similar skills have a right to form a workplace association in order to enhance their skills and thereby their own well-being. Note the connection with the principle of private property. Since a person has a right to what is created with his their hands or mind, they also have a right to the means (an association with their fellow workers) whereby they can become more creative and skillful and thereby better provide for their own needs and the needs of their dependents.

Principle of Cooperation

A person at work with others on a common task has an obligation to moderate self-interest in order to accomplish that task. Note the connection between the principle of contributive

justice and the principle of cooperation. The first is broader in application than the second. The second has special application in the workplace.

Principle of the Common Good

When choosing among alternative courses of action that will or may affect others for whom one has some responsibility, the person with superior responsibilities should choose the action that provides the greatest good for the greatest number of persons. Note how this principle may be used to meet one's obligations under distributive justice.

Principle of Hedonism

Seek personal pleasure, avoid personal pain. The former is morally good, while the latter is morally bad. "If it feels good, do it" is a commonplace expression among those persons who accept this principle. Notice the difficulties that practicing this principle creates for (1) buyer/seller, employer/employee under the principle of equivalence, (2) superior/subordinates under the principle of distributive justice, and (3) individual member/group under the principle of contributive justice.

Principle of the Double Effect

When an action is morally ambiguous because it has two effects, one that is morally good and one that is morally bad, it is unethical to take action unless four conditions are met. First, the morally good effect is greater than the bad effect. Second, the bad effect is not intended. Third, the good effect is not the consequence of the bad effect; rather, the two effects are intertwined and inseparable so that the action embraces both effects directly. In other words, the bad effect is an unavoidable side effect incidental to the action. Fourth, the action having a double effect is morally good in itself or at least is morally neutral.

Principle of Free Choice

If one is not free to act, one cannot be held morally responsible even when the action has effects that are morally bad.

Principle of Proportionate Force

In protecting one's own life or the life of another person against a life-threatening force, one may use whatever force is necessary provided it is proportionate to but not greater than the life-threatening force. In police affairs, the use of such force that leads to the death of the person using life-threatening force is called "justifiable homicide."

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Table 1.

AMERICAN MARKETING ASSOCIATION CODE OF ETHICS AND
CORRESPONDING PRINCIPLES OF ECONOMIC JUSTICE

| Code of Ethics* | Corresponding Principle |
|---|--|
| <p>As a member of the American Marketing Association, I recognize the significance of my professional conduct and my responsibilities to society and to the other members of my profession:</p> | |
| <p>1. By acknowledging my accountability to society as a whole as well as to the organization for which I work.</p> | <p><i>contributive justice and equivalence</i></p> |
| <p>2. By pledging my efforts to assure that all presentations of goods, services, and concepts to be made honestly and clearly.</p> | <p><i>equivalence and contributive justice</i></p> |
| <p>3. By striving to improve marketing knowledge and practice in order to better serve society.</p> | <p><i>contributive justice and equivalence</i></p> |
| <p>4. By supporting free consumer choice in circumstances that are legal and are consistent with generally accepted community standards.</p> | <p><i>equivalence** and contributive justice</i></p> |
| <p>5. By pledging to use the highest professional standards in my work and in competitive activity.</p> | <p><i>accepts obligations set forth above</i></p> |
| <p>By acknowledging the right of the American Marketing Association, through established procedure, to withdraw my membership if I am found to be in violation of ethical</p> | <p><i>accepts the discipline the Association under distributive justice for failure to meet obligations as set forth above</i></p> |

* Cummings 1987.

** Note, also, the connection to the principle of free choice (see appendix).

ENDNOTES

1. In this regard see, for instance, the Dolechecks (*Business* 1989) and Robin and others (*Business Horizons* 1989).

2. The inside trader uses information that others in the market do not have in order to gain an advantage over others who buy and sell a particular corporation's shares. The information is acquired not through legitimate effort but through the abuse of a confidential relationship directly or indirectly. This abuse threatens the very existence of the group (the traders on the stock exchange) because it breaks down the trust that implicitly binds traders together. Outsiders lose confidence in the exchange because insiders have taught them that the playing field is not level for everyone. The insider trader is the moral equivalent of the gambler playing with a deck of muted cards. He has changed the game from one of skill and chance to one of connivance and deception. McGee takes the position that insider trading is not unethical because there is no evidence that any individual or group is being harmed by the practice.

3. Other films that might be considered include the following:

| | |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------|
| Man in the Gray Flannel Suit | Pawnbroker |
| Death of a Salesman | Room at the Top |
| It's a Wonderful Life | Fountainhead |
| Requiem for a Heavyweight | Broadcast News |