

The Revision of a Marketing Course using a Competency-Based Curriculum

SUMMARY: The consideration of the dynamic environment of the market within the classroom results in more complex material to be discussed as well as complications as to how it should be taught. By utilizing a methodological orientation for students, these complications can be surmounted and professionals better equipped to act in this new context will be the result. Incorporating updated and innovative material into the curriculum, and implementing leading educational methodologies has proven to be the greatest challenge for managers of higher education institutions. This paper presents the process of reviewing a *lato sensu* postgraduate course in marketing offered at a Brazilian business school. Changes were implemented to adapt the course to the demands of the job market. The results of the quantitative phase of the research showed that the course has many opportunities for improvement; especially regarding the course methodology. The results of the qualitative stage indicate an opportunity for improvement of the contents of the course by updating them and ensuring they adhere to professional practice. The redesign process of the course was based on the *competency-based* curriculum. A competency profile of the manager of contemporary marketing was also developed and used to guide the construction of the disciplines grid as well as the definition of the methodological approach.

KEYWORDS: Higher Education, Marketing Challenges, Competency Based Curriculum.

1 Introduction

With the rise of new technologies and new public and private institutions, more students with work experience are deciding to return to pursue higher education, and students' overall expectations are changing. As the number of new private institutions continues to increase, the competition between institutions (both public and private)

increases. This competition modifies the education sector's dynamics in such way that it becomes market oriented according to Levy (2002, 2003, 2004, 2006, 2008). To survive, each institution needs to look for alternatives to outshine the others and to maximize their perceived value, since this drives to better customer loyalty and retention, leading to a stronger competitive position and, consequently, to a higher market share (Bearden and Teel 1983; Fornell 1992; Fornell et al. 1996). In order to accomplish this, the institutions need to develop practices that meet the current market demands.

A way to adapt institution's courses to today's needs is to shift from *traditional* teaching and learning methodologies, in which "students...do not directly participate in the learning process" (Ryan and Martens, 1989, p. 20); to *active* learning, in which students are included in the learning process (Prince, 2004). The new challenge consists of incorporating the *active* methodologies of teaching and learning into the curriculum of higher education courses; especially in the *lato-sensu* postgraduate studies, which will be seen as a competitive advantage to the institutions. In terms of postgraduate studies in the business administration area (more specifically, in the marketing sector), the challenge becomes even more relevant considering new business market dynamics, the environmental instability, and the amount of available information. These factors contribute for the constant research regarding market information must due to the large amount of information produced by the advance of information technology. As the rhythm of changes increases (Kotler, 2000), higher education institutions need to find alternative ways to incorporate into classroom different strategies aimed to better teach their students. Strategies of active learning, for instance, might help to attract students' interest (Bonwell; Eison, 1991). By bringing into the classroom the market's dynamic environment, the complexity of what should be discussed increases in terms of content, as well as with respect to *how* it should be discussed. Changes must be made regarding the methodological orientation; the modernization of the field must include an

unceasing improvement of the quality offered, which should aim for the formation of a more prepared professional to fit within this new context (Seung, Stepich and Cox, 2006).

Incorporating updated and innovative material into the curriculum, and implementing leading educational methodologies, has proven to be the greatest challenge for managers of higher education institutions. Usually, higher education is organized in passive learning through traditional disciplines, which don't take a systemic perspective and the act of learning is fragmented. Therefore, the result is a professional not fully prepared for cooperative efforts (CORTESE, 2003). In business schools that offer *lato sensu* post graduation courses, especially, the focus must shift towards more innovative ways of learning since they need to follow market dynamics. In order to achieve that, methodologies regarding a more active approach might help, since they rely on the students thinking about what they're doing, as well as reading, analyzing and discussing everyday problems (Bonwell; Eison, 1991). If accomplished, the customer's perceived value of the business school increases. Programs intended for modernization of higher education must include a strategy for the continuous improvement of the quality of the educational services provided by higher education institutions. The general objective of this paper is to present the review process of a broad postgraduate course in marketing offered by a Brazilian business school, which aimed for the adequacy of content and methodological practices in order to better respond to market demands. The specific objectives are to investigate students' perception of the course's methodological practices, learn about professors' perception of contents that are taught at the course and acknowledge CEO's perception about the necessary competencies for a marketing professional in the current market environment, and also to present a new proposition of curriculum for the marketing course.

2. Theoretical Review

2.1 Changes in the marketing field

To understand the current situation of the marketing field, it is important to analyze the development of this sector's challenges. Marketing deals with the exchange of relations between organizations and the environment in which they operate with consideration of the needs of both parties. It seeks to align what the organization has to offer to the specific market's demands and trends. Marketing tends to be valued especially in scenarios where supply exceeds demand, which are considered to have higher levels of competitiveness (Kotler 2000). Finally, one can understand marketing as the activity responsible for managing the relationship between the organization and the market. The concept has evolved over time from a procedural approach to a more systemic perspective that focuses on value creation. It is important to note that this evolution occurred due to changes in the organizational environment (Martin 2011; Moffitt, Dover, and Tapscott 2010). The development of information technology was the main driver of the environment transformation. The continuous rise in levels of connectivity, caused by the use of multiple devices and platforms, helps users to communicate more quickly and easily and enables more dynamic interactions between people and organizations. These faster interactions contribute to better adjustments for globalization expansion and help to create more fragmented markets (Danciu 2013; Leeflang, Verhoef, Dahlström and Freundt, 2014).

The technological change also entails a behavioral change. In the social dimension, the consumers are more informed and connected. They inspect products, services, and companies and expect transparency from the organizations regarding the products and services. Trust is an important factor in the buying decision. The consumer also shares with other consumers their shopping experience. The marketing should include a more social approach in their processes, which allows consumer engagement by using a collaborative model for product development and communication (Martin 2011; Danciu 2013; Leeflang, Verhoef, Dahlström and Freundt 2014). Consumers will become increasingly concerned

about sustainability; therefore, the marketing strategy should include aspects related to social responsibility, transparency, and sustainability to align the organizations with the expectations of customers (Kotler, Kartajaya and Setiawan 2010; Danciu 2013; Leeflang, Verhoef, Dahlström and Freundt 2014). The context of rapid change is undeniable. The remaining question is: are today's professionals ready to face an increasingly dynamic market? And yet more important, are higher education institutions teaching competencies and skills that will help this professional in the future?

2.2 Innovation in classroom practices

Studies of educational trends seek to illustrate the connection between content, student, and teacher. *Content* is the product of social and cultural events and is considered to be the material taught (Shweder and Munch, 1981). The *student*, on the other hand, is the subject who will acquire the knowledge (Shweder and Munch, 1981). Thirdly, the *teacher* is the link between the subject and the material, content and student (Shweder and Munch, 1981). The approach of the competency-based curriculum could be a way to connect these three spheres (content, student and teacher). This approach has been growing for several decades (Gillies and Howard, 2003; Gordon and Issenberg, 2003; James, 2002) and it constitutes in a way to stimulate learning, since it aims to ensure that learners will be capable of demonstrating their learned capabilities after they have conquered a combination of knowledge, skills, and abilities (Youn, Stepich and Cox, 2006). According to Ropé (2002), knowledge should be recognized as the action taken by the student such that knowing how to act supersedes simply knowing the content. In a competency-based curriculum, the act of learning doesn't focus only on the content itself, but also on the ability to evoke what is known in order to accomplish what is proposed or required (Machado, 2002). The grid is a combination of general knowledge, professional and work experiences, and life (Perrenoud, 2002; Paranhos et al, 2010). Because of this, the lessons take a more dynamic and interesting

approach since they depend not only on the teacher, but also on the individual experience of each student.

The use of technology in the classroom becomes an important tool to allow knowledge to be *built* with the student, not merely transferred as in traditional models (Mercado 2002). It's up to the student, on the other hand, to seek understanding through the experiences of teachers, colleagues, and their own. Innovation seems to be especially important in higher education as the profile of these students is generally more focused on the professional experience compared to more basic areas of education. Therefore, it is essential that the contents be aligned with the reality experienced by this student so the identification and approach of the two spheres, professional and theoretical, happens.

3. Study Design

Considering the complexity of the subject, we chose to work with the triangulation of methods, which uses two different techniques, conducted in a complementary way, for the same research question. In order to accomplish this, we worked with two approaches in order to provide depth to the study: a quantitative approach, focusing on diagnosis, and a qualitative approach, exploring aspects more related to the construction of the proposal. The object of the study was a management postgraduate course (*lato sensu*) offered by an internationally accredited Brazilian business school. This course has a basic cycle focused on aspects related to management in general and a specific cycle that allows a specialization in marketing. In order to fully comprehend the object and the room for improvement in the postgraduate course, we chose to work with three different groups: the quantitative approach was used to learn from former students which were the positive parts of our course, and what didn't meet their expectations. The qualitative approach was used with both the professors of the course and CEO's of important companies. The professors were asked to identify which contents were most important, in their point of view, to be taught to the students. The CEO's

were told to think of which competencies were most important for marketing managers to succeed in today's environment.

In the **quantitative** stage, the coverage was prioritized instead of depth. This approach aims to identify, as extensively as possible, the students' perception of methodological contents and practices developed by the postgraduate course (*lato sensu*) offered by an internationally accredited Brazilian business school. A questionnaire was sent to 269 former students who completed the program in the last six months prior to the survey. A total of 80 completed questionnaires were received; equivalent to a return rate of 29.73%. The questionnaires were created by the authors and pretested. The data was treated using descriptive statistics. The questionnaire included 16 questions regarding the achievement of the proposed educational objectives, the methodological approach of the program, the extra-curricular activities, and results provided by the program.

The **qualitative** approach investigated how executives and marketing professors are setting their professional practices to face the new challenges of this field of knowledge. The aim was to investigate possibilities for adaptation of the course in order to make it more adherent to the new market demands. In this case, the option to work with a qualitative approach, which allows further exploration of the topic, was chosen and the technique used was the focus group, a type of qualitative group interview. This method creates conditions for a more spontaneous manifestation of the participants and allows for a broader exploration of the subject. Two focus groups were then created in order to collect the answers from both executives and marketing professors. The first group was composed by 8 marketing executives of large companies who had a minimum of five years' experience in management positions, and minimum professional experience of ten years at the time. The first group aimed for a more practical perspective; the second, composed by 12 marketing professors from graduate courses, sought a more structured view of the subject. The second group was

composed by marketing professors who taught disciplines offered in a Brazilian *latu sensu* graduate program. The professors who have participated of the focus group have at least a master's degree and professional experience in marketing, as either a manager or a consultant. In both cases, the aim was to identify the main marketing challenges faced today by organizations. The results were used to determine the skills to be taught by the course. This methodological design made it possible to combine the vision of students, teachers and executives in order to redesign and improve the course.

5. Results

Considering the complexity of the subject, we chose to work with the triangulation of methods, which uses two different techniques, conducted in a complementary way, for the same research question. In order to accomplish this, we worked with two approaches in order to provide depth to the study: a quantitative approach, focusing on diagnosis, and a qualitative approach, exploring aspects more related to the construction of the proposal. The object of the study was a management postgraduate course (*lato sensu*) offered by an internationally accredited Brazilian business school. This course has a basic cycle focused on aspects related to management in general and a specific cycle that allows a specialization in marketing.

5.1 Quantitative Results

The diagnosis of the program's current performance as perceived by the students, which was created by the quantitative study, points to the results described below.

It was considered that, in general, the teaching objectives of the course were being achieved considering the students' view since they all had average scores greater than 3 on a 5 point scale that measured the pedagogical objectives of the course (1 being the lowest and 5 the highest). On this table, the objectives measured were: To deepen their knowledge, Identify your professional goals, Planning actions of personal and professional development, Enlarge

systemic and integrated visions of management, Develop / expand knowledge, skills and attitudes in the chosen emphasis, Apply knowledge acquired in the course, Aggregate systemic value to the chosen emphasis, Consolidate integrated view of management and To base the development of term paper. The average of all assessed goals was 3.65. Emphasis must be given to the "deepening and broadening of knowledge" objectives, which are considered to be the most basic in the cognitive domain and obtained average above 4. It is also noteworthy that the average score in the category referred to as the "application of knowledge acquired in the course" (3.23), was the lowest of all evaluated objectives. This result needs to be studied more carefully since the applicability of the contents discussed in the course (in other words, the development of the *know-how*) is one of the priority objectives of a post graduation *lato sensu* course, especially in management. Regarding the course's educational activities, the students were asked to rate the Preliminary Activity (an activity supposed to be completed before the beginning of each semestre), Activities in Classroom (during the semestre) and Learning Check (at the end of the semestre) on the same 5 point scale. the proposed activities in the classroom were given higher scores by students This may be related to the constant search of teachers for innovation and renovation of classroom practices in isolated initiatives. Regarding the course's educational activities, activities outside of the classroom have lower averages and the preliminary activity had the worst average among the educational activities of the course. The students were also asked to rate if they had used any of the extracurricular activities offered (Individual technical support, Advice to curriculum customization, Individual Counseling of Career Management and Lecture of Career Management). The percentage of utilization of offered extra-curricular activities is considered very low, since the highest percentage of usage was 46.3% to "advice to curriculum customization". In this case, there is a great opportunity to improve the learning experience beyond the classroom limits.

82.5% of students say they can already perceive ongoing contributions in their professional and personal life. Dealing with the completion goals intended for the course, all of them may also be considered accomplished since the lower average was 3.85 on a 5-point scale. The goals listed at the questionnaire were: Larger systemic and integrated view of management, Become more skilled in management practice, To apply management tools, Develop the ability to work in teams, Acquire greater ability to adapt to situations and diverse groups and Learning by sharing concepts, practices and information. It is observed that the item, "able to apply management tools," although it can be considered answered, is the one that had the lowest average (3,85). The overall average of the course results was 4.02. The results from the quantitative approach used in this study demonstrate that the course, despite receiving a good evaluation, has many opportunities for improvement; especially regarding the methodological procedures through the identification and implementation of practices that extend to the applicability of the content, as well as the expansion the of the activities' effectiveness that take place outside of the classroom.

5.2 Qualitative Results

The process of analysis of the qualitative stage data developed as follows: first, an review of the transcripts was made to identify convergent points and generate analytical categories that constitute the appointed marketing challenges. A semantic equivalence has been drawn up for the purpose of extracting the main direction of the lines, inspired by the eidetic reduction. After the development of the semantic equivalence matrix, the content analysis table was built and the number of citations of each identified category was counted. It should be noted that, in both cases, the participants were asked to openly, and without restrictions, point out the marketing challenges that organizations are facing today. From the analysis of the results obtained, we identified six categories that represent the challenges of contemporary marketing: Customer and Market Knowledge: knowledge and relationship with customers and prospects, in order to better understand their needs; Brand Excellence: pursuit

of a brand's promise's excellence, materializing a way of thinking and doing business to arouse the confidence and admiration in all your business relationships; Commercial: planning the sale of products and services, aiming at higher profitability and productivity for the enterprise; Digital: use of new technologies for design and implementation of marketing strategies; Individual manager features: the set of individual's skills and attitudes; Business Management: aspects related to the systemic vision and strategic direction of the organization.

The challenges related specifically to the marketing area of expertise could be grouped into the following categories: knowledge of customers and markets, brand excellence, and commercialization, where lays the main challenges in the view of the respondent. It is noteworthy that challenges specifically related to the development of the value proposition, or the solution to the client, were not mentioned. Other issues beyond marketing specifically were also identified and generated three categories: one category related to the field of technology (Digital), a category related to personal development (Individual manager features), and one related to strategic and systemic view of the organization category (Business management). Aspects related to the strategic vision of the organization and personal characteristics are expected, and, in the face of environmental changes resulting from technological development, those relating to technology also become part of the agenda of the respondents. The group of marketing executives were concerned with aspects related to business management, systemic and strategic vision of the organization, customers' knowledge, and market understanding. This can be explained by the fact that the respondents occupy strategic positions in their organizations and are executives responsible for marketing. Therefore, to develop the main strategy, it is important to take a more strategic view of marketing and its integration with other areas of the company. Since, in general, these executives lead the process of implementation and monitoring marketing

strategies, the concern with the development of individual characteristics can be seen, such as leadership, negotiation, and communication. The aspects related to brand management were also mentioned. As a strategic asset in the relationship process between the company and the market, the brand focuses the concern not only from marketing executives, observed in this study, but also from the top leaderships of the organization.

Among the marketing professors, aspects related to customer knowledge, market understanding, and excellence of the brand were pointed out and coincide with the executive vision. This reinforces the notion that these areas have the most important challenges linked to contemporary management markets. However, there is a different perception regarding the aspects related to marketing and technological environment, or digital, mentioned with relative importance by teachers, but not mentioned at all by executives. This can be explained by the fact that the teachers act more specifically on issues related to management of organizations markets. In this case, the aspects related to marketing of products and the digital environment, may have been considered in the implementation of the marketing strategy. Innovations in these two fields are challenges of contemporary management of markets and should not be overlooked. Finally, a different perception regarding the individual characteristics and business management can also be seen. Individual characteristics and business management is more intensely scrutinized by executives than by teachers, and once again, this is related to the place that executives hold in the organization, associated with their responsibilities. The results of the qualitative stage indicate an opportunity for improvement in the review of the contents discussed in the course in order to make them more up to date and adhering to professional practice. This idea combines with the results of the quantitative stage, which pointed to the need of a methodological procedure expansion that would enable the application of the contents discussed in class.

6. Reformulation of the course and implementation of a competencies oriented curriculum

The competency-based curriculum was chosen to guide the process of the course reformulation, since in this approach, the focus of learning is not only the content, but also in the implementation of capacity. The beginning of the process defined the competencies profile to be formed by the course. This definition was based on the qualitative approach developed in this study, where teachers and marketing department executives pointed out today's main challenges in this area of expertise. This revision was focused on the *specific* cycle of the course; thus, the challenges related to individual capacities and business management would be included in the common cycle. The construction of the competency profile was based on only the specific content of the marketing area. It formed a profile of competency of the modern marketing manager (Table 5), which is designed to identify behaviors that indicate an individual's ability to successfully execute marketing functions. The details of the contemporary manager's competency profile in marketing included aspects related to competency, key action, and observable performances. On the area of competency, the results of the qualitative approach were considered and pointed out the current challenges; for key action, the main action to be developed in that area of expertise was identified. Finally, the observable performances were listed, which supports the evaluation of the competency development.

This profile was used as reference for structuring the subjects of the marketing emphasis' course both for the selection of the program content and for the definition of educational activities. The definition of disciplines follows the competency areas defined in the profile. The pedagogical objectives proposed for each of the disciplines aim to meet the detailed observable performances in the profile. The marketing strategy of disciplines and marketing plan were considered transversal and permeate the contents of the other disciplines

and are also mandatory. The other subjects are elective and can be selected according to the need for development of each student. The digital issue is also addressed across the board in the disciplines. **Figure 1** shows the grid of proposed disciplines to the specific cycle of marketing based on the skills profile of the contemporary manager in marketing.

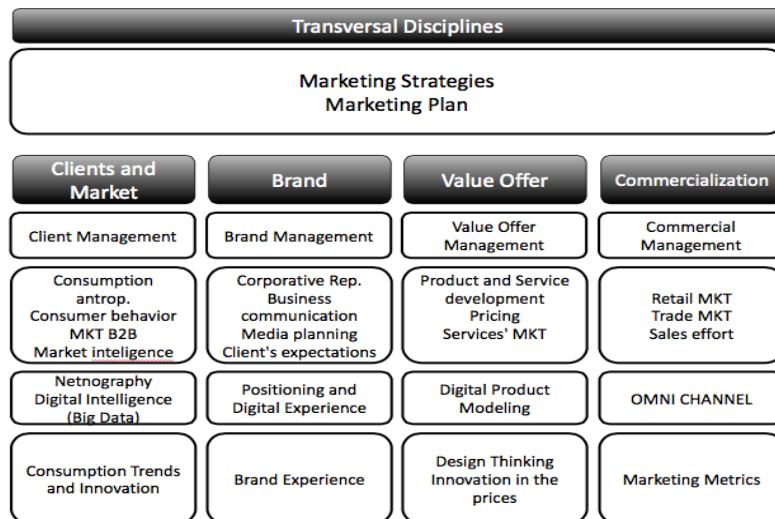


Fig. 1 - Disciplines Grid Marketing Cycle. Elaborated by the authors.

The goal was to incorporate the role of previous activity developed outside of the classroom into the methodological approach and educational activities of the course and to try to focus on the conceptual leveling; thus, leaving the approaches related to the application to be developed in the classroom. Also, the "learning check" evaluation activity was modified, prioritizing issues related to the application of the content. **Figure 2** illustrates the novel process of learning the route.

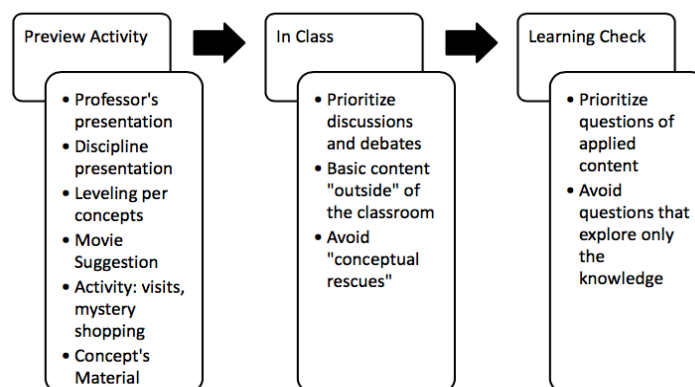


Fig. 2 - The novel process of learning the route. Elaborated by the authors.

7. Final Thoughts

The *lato sensu* postgraduate courses have the challenge of always being aligned with trends and innovations regarding the content and the methodological practices. Especially in the specific management courses for marketing, following market trends is a key activity since the market is the proper object of the course. In addition, students are increasingly informed and familiar with technological devices that can be tools in the processes of teaching and learning. The competency-based curriculum proved to be suitable for the process of reformulation of the *lato sensu* post graduation course in management, in the specific cycle of marketing, since it enabled a more focused approach to practice and application and, therefore, more aligned with market trends. The goal now is to expand this process for the entire course, as well as for other courses from the institution. In addition, the quantitative approach of this study will be applied annually in order to monitor the results of this review and sustain a continuous process of improvement. The qualitative approach will be applied every two years, in order to keep up the program's contents.

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