Corporate Culture in the Academic Marketing Department

Alvin J. Williams and Richard C. Vreeland

The purpose of this article is to provide insight into the efficacy of the corporate culture idea to improved performance in academic marketing departments. All departments have a culture. The challenge is to formulate a healthy and viable culture. Abbreviated case examples are included to demonstrate contrasting cultures.

In recent years business organizations have been inundated with a plethora of viewpoints, perspectives, and applications of the concept of corporate culture. It has been proclaimed as one of the most logical complete explanations to describe the myriad and complex variables that unite to form and define the organization. Evidence from academic scholars and practitioners indicates that firms have experienced productivity upsurges following a more thorough understanding of the concept and its potential as an instrument of effective management. However, the concept of corporate culture has yet to be transferred and applied to academic areas in general and marketing departments in particular.

Thus, the purpose of this article is to provide insight into the efficacy of the corporate culture idea to improved performance in academic marketing departments. In addition, abbreviated case examples will be presented to highlight actual corporate culture implications for marketing academicians.

CULTURAL MIX OF ACADEMIC MARKETING DEPARTMENTS

Senn (1986) has defined corporate culture as "the values, norms, and unwritten rules of conduct of an organization, as well as the management style, priorities, beliefs and interpersonal behaviors that prevail." This definition embodies the essence of corporate culture. If managed and developed properly, corporate culture has unlimited potential as a tool for enhancing marketing department productivity.

Alvin J. Williams and Richard C. Vreeland are in the Department of Marketing, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, Mississippi.

Given the numerous pressures confronted by marketing professors and their respective chairs and deans, it is essential to explore avenues to facilitate getting the most out of limited resources. Since the human resource is the least expendable and the most critical of all inputs in academia, leaders must commence their efforts for improvement here. Marketing educators, along with other professors, are constantly being asked to enhance research productivity and simultaneously be excellent teachers and performers of service activities. The understanding, or the lack of understanding, of the departmental culture may expedite or impede the attainment of goals and objectives.

The culture of an academic marketing department is multifaceted. It has many dimensions, perspectives, and components. It can be defined as the composite of values, ideas, directives, comraderie, orientation toward teaching, research, and service, and the general stated and unstated raison d'etre for the department that guides the behavior of its members. The "tone" of the department and thus the core of the departmental culture must be set by the chair within the context of the institution's mission.

The following sections describe some of the potential constituent parts of the culture of an academic marketing unit. Since marketers are fond of the word "mix," it is appropriate to label this the "cultural mix" of the marketing department. The order of discussion does not indicate relative importance of the components.

Initially, the emphasis on qualitative or behavioral concepts versus quantitative aspects of the marketing curriculum is considered. Although ideally equal attention should be placed on both areas, departments may tend to emphasize one more so than the other. Whether or not courses in the curriculum focus on statistical and/or applied mathematical approaches to marketing decision making is part of the group's culture. Other programs may stress the conceptual or theoretical dimensions of marketing. The relative emphasis on each or the appropriate degree of balance is a cultural component. It influences the behavior and instructional methods/approaches utilized by professors.

The second point of consideration revolves around the emphasis placed on the marketing mix variables of product, promotion, place, and price. Some programs, consciously or unconsciously, devote more time to certain variables than others. If a school is known for its strong programs in logistics, physical distribution, and transportation, these areas will tend to receive more attention than other factors, even when they are not the key subjects under discussion. This aspect of culture is part of the fabric of the marketing faculty.

Next is the set of problem-solving skills disseminated by marketing professors. Marketing problem-solving skills can be categorized as creative, judgmental, and quantitative. The makeup of an academic marketing unit and the structure of the curriculum will reinforce the importance ranking of each of these skills. A quality program should produce students with an appropriate mixture of these skills to facilitate problem solving in business organizations. This mixture is an integral part of the departmental culture.

The fourth aspect is the value placed on the worth of students. In the scheme of things, how important is the total development of the individual student? Some departments are student-centered and they promote frequent interaction among faculty and students at all levels. They value the ideas and opinions of students and recognize their "true" importance. This value manifests itself in the amount of time marketing professors allocate to such areas as career counseling, job placement, and participation in groups like collegiate chapter of the American Marketing Association. In some institutions only lip-service or surface-level attention is paid to students' needs. The perceived position of students in the hierarchy of things is a germane part of the marketing department's cultural identity and definition.

The fifth influential factor in the cultural composition of the department is the desired mix among teaching, research, and service. In many cases the mixture is predetermined at higher administrative levels. Even so, the marketing department can focus and allocate its resources toward each of the areas in a fashion consistent with its perception of the mission and goals. The "publish or perish" syndrome existing in many institutions is an integral portion of the cultural constitution of the marketing department. In other schools the key emphasis is on excellent teaching and the development of quality students through direct faculty involvement. Research is of secondary importance here. To insure attention is properly focused, the reward system system is so structured that it reinforces the values and behaviors consistent with the culture of the department. Faculty members develop or devise work strategies in a way such that they receive the greatest benefits from the system.

The frequency, quality, and type of interaction among members of the marketing department can contribute to the nature of the group's culture. Marketing departments have personalities. They are the sum total of the personalities of the individual members, plus the interaction effects. Interfacing with department members may be determined by the compatibility of the individuals involved. In some departments faculty members are both professional colleagues and friends. They interact on the job and away from the office. They share common interests professionally and socially. The nature of this culture is far different from one in which faculty members are overly critical, competitive, and envious of the accomplishments of their peers. The amount of interaction is negligible and in some cases is actually avoided. The quality of interpersonal relationships within the marketing department may have a positive or negative effect on the capacity of the group to be productive. The lack of team spirit and harmony channels energy and resources in a less than optimal manner. This idea of team work is consistent with ideas advanced by Clemens (1986), who discusses a statement by Pericles

(the father of Athens' Golden Age) emphasizing the importance of having fun. He felt that fun was an integral part of the culture of an organization. He stated, "when work is over we are in a position to enjoy all kinds of recreation for our spirits." This in turn would be reflected in the performance of workers.

The seventh ingredient in the marketing department's cultural fabric is the emphasis placed on external consulting and contacts with marketing professionals and practitioners. Many marketing professors supplement their income and simultaneously apply what they teach by engaging in consulting activities. The extent to which this is done may be still another example of a cultural trait or factor. Some cultures encourage and promote frequent interfacing with practitioners through consultancies, while other marketing department cultures see these activities as detracting from the primary goals of teaching and research.

The last factor discussed is that of characteristics of the leader. This may be the single most important determinant of departmental culture. Clemens (1986) also indicates that Pericles showed that the establishment of a strong corporate culture is a function of two things. The first of these is the determination by the leader of what makes the organization different or unique. The second is that the leader must eloquently communicate those differences to the group's members. This same logic has numerous implications for the management of academic marketing units. The leader, by virtue of management style, personality, values, charisma, and communication skills, is in the position of determining the boundaries and the structure of the department. Of equal importance in this process is the perception of the leader by subordinates. The leader provides the atmosphere and environment needed to produce the desired results.

The above eight variables or factors embody the essence of the culture of an academic marketing department. The interaction among the variables provides the unique quality or distinguishing characteristics for a particular department. Some variables may play a more significant role in characterizing a certain culture at a point in time. The leader must assess these factors and determine how they should be manipulated to shape the desired culture.

CONTRASTING EXAMPLES

The marketing department of a southeastern university has made a conscious effort to develop a particular type of departmental culture. The AACSB-accredited institution has approximately 12,000 students, and the marketing department has 450 undergraduate majors and 12 faculty members.

The first step in developing a culture is determining the unique or distinguishing attributes or qualities of the department. It was recognized that in preparing marketing students for responsible positions in organizations they must be fully equipped with four skills: thinking, problem solving, communication, and human relations. The appropriate combination of these skills will lead to success in most situations. Programs and course offerings were initiated to fit the demands of these skill areas. The executive problem-solving sequence was developed. Included were courses in creative marketing, marketing management, and marketing research. The courses focus on creative problem solving, judgmental problem solving, and fact or quantitative problem solving, respectively.

The unique element in this series of courses is creative marketing. The institution is among the select few in the country and the only one in the South offering such a course. The course focuses exclusively on developing students' creativity. Course objectives are:

1. To encourage students to find their own meanings and applications of creativity and to compare their learnings with others;

2. To help students learn informal strategies for processing information;

3. To provide experiential activities that can be transferred to realistic problem-solving situations;

4. To apply cognitive, theoretical information previously learned to real-world situations;

5. To have students interact effectively in task-oriented groups; and

6. To help students understand themselves and their roles in relation to others.

Some of the major problem-solving techniques applied in the course are brainstorming, forced relationships, heuristic ideation technique, and fantasy (Lehrer and Smith 1984).

The creative marketing course, coupled with the traditional marketing research and marketing management courses, provides students with essential decision-making skills. In addition, students must take 15 semester hours of marketing.

Another distinguishing characteristic of the culture at the institutions is the existence of emphasis areas within the department. After considerable counseling about career goals and plans, students are placed in one of the five areas on concentration: marketing management, sales management, advertising, retail management, or purchasing management. All of the marketing courses, in addition to the three-course problem-solving sequence, fit a particular emphasis or career track. This structure recognizes the significance of preparing students for specific areas of employment within the marketing profession.

The next phase of developing culture involves communicating those differences to the faculty. This entails the enumeration of and elaboration on the core values of the department. In a memo to the faculty of this institution's marketing department, the chair shared his perceptions of the department's beliefs and values. They are:

1. We should prepare our students to compete for jobs on a national basis;
2. Students should be treated as persons of worth who legitimately have claims on our time and energy;
3. The faculty should respect the difference in abilities and preferences for different kinds of productivity among its members;
4. The faculty should treat each other as persons of worth even though we do not always agree;
5. The faculty should teach, do research and writing, consult, and try to become nationally recognized in their area of expertise; and
6. The faculty should participate in departmental decisions.

This statement by the chair sets the stage for action by faculty and students. It gives direction and purpose to departmental efforts.

Another key variable in the culture of the department is the social interaction among faculty. The group frequently has social affairs on holidays, in addition to birthday celebrations and other important events. Gatherings of this nature allow faculty to interface on a less formal basis and also promote genuine harmony and team spirit within the department.

What have been the results of this experiment or exercise in department cultural development? The marketing department has achieved a national reputation for producing students of outstanding caliber. This is reflected by the number and quality of firms employing and promoting graduates, as well as the market-plus starting salaries for our students. Students recognize and appreciate the considerable amount of attention and assistance they receive from faculty members. They in turn support the financial efforts of the department upon graduation.

Individual faculty members have attained national and international distinction in their areas of specialization. They are recognized by scholars and practitioners for their contributions to the discipline.

Finally, the department is frequently recognized by external review teams and other departments in the college of business administration for its exemplary programs and personnel. In some cases the program has served as a model for other areas.

All of these positive factors resulted from the conscious design and development of a department culture that fostered productivity and achievement. This experience can be shared by others if the appropriate vision and personnel are present.

In striking contrast to the above example of developing a positive culture is that of a marketing department in a major midwestern university that had little vision regarding its role or purpose. This institution is also AACSB-accredited, but has a doctoral program. The department consisted of nonproductive senior professors concentrating on retirement. Undergraduate majors received little guidance and the structure of the course of study was not well articulated. Students took a group of courses that had little relationship to each other and led

to no specific end. The culture could be described as chaotic, directionless, and in a state of malaise. The vague statements of direction that did exist were poorly communicated by the leader. For all practical purposes, faculty and students were oblivious of the fundamental mission of the department.

This situation manifested itself in the form of declining graduate and undergraduate enrollments, difficulty in recruiting top-notch junior faculty, a reduction in the number of major national firms recruiting marketing graduates, and less-than-enthusiastic reception of doctoral graduates by major schools.

The above examples clearly provide insight into the shaping and development of contrasting cultures in academic marketing departments and the ensuing results. Department chairs can learn that desirable cultures can be formed with the appropriate effort and combination of resources.

CONCLUSIONS

The fundamental purpose of this article was to expound on the feasibility and applicability of corporate culture concepts as now practiced in industry to academic marketing departments. The answer to these inquiries is a resounding yes. The concepts can be applied and hold great potential for improving performance.

All organizations or departments have a culture. The challenge is to formulate a healthy and viable culture. According to a recent article, a noted expert in the corporate culture areas provided the following ten elements that go into a healthy culture (*Chain Store Age Executive* 1985):

1. Openness to changes;
2. A high level of personal accountability by all employees, including executives;
3. A low level of internal politicking;
4. A low level of internal competition;
5. A service consciousness;
6. A bias for action;
7. Individual initiative and creativity at all levels;
8. Risk taking;
9. Mutual support and recognition; and
10. Feedback and coaching.

All of these factors have some relevance to academic marketing units. Department chairs have the Herculean task of carving out the mission and direction of the unit within the confines of limited resources and risky opportunities. It should be part of their responsibility to shape and develop a new culture as well as redirect a sick and ailing culture. Cultures can be conceived, nurtured, and cultivated to facilitate the attainment of desired ends. The cultural mix must be studied, analyzed, and subjected to criticism to achieve positive results. Departmental leaders must recognize that cultures are dynamic and are continually evolving. This heightens and intensifies the challenge of planning and executing appropriate action at the right time.

During times of metamorphosis in collegiate business schools and marketing departments, developing healthy cultures offers countless tangible and intangible benefits to the individuals and the institution. It represents a different approach or route to the same old goals of teaching, research, and service. This tool presents a real opportunity for enlightened managers of collegiate marketing departments.

REFERENCES

Chain Store Age Executive (1985), "Corporate Culture: Intangible Reflections on the Bottom Line" (November), 147-150.

Clemens, John K. (1986), "A Lesson From 4431 B.C.," *Fortune* (October 13), 161-164.

Lehrer, Sara Kay and Thomas D. Smith (1984), "Creative Marketing," in *Proceedings of the Southwestern Marketing Association Conference*, James Lumpkin, ed.

Senn, Larry (1986), "Corporate Culture," *Management World* (April/May), 16-18.