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THE TEXTBOOK SELECTION PROCESS: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF FACULTY CHOICE CRITERIA

Textbooks have been largely ignored in recent examinations of the marketing of higher education. This study finds that faculty members are largely satisfied with the current textbook offerings. Of interest is an examination of the process of textbook selection and the choice criteria used. Overwhelmingly, author generated characteristics were found to be used by faculty members in the selection of textbooks.

INTRODUCTION

The role of textbooks as a crucial component of the product offering of marketing education has received little of the attention now being given to the marketing of higher education. Research on the marketing of higher education has been a popular topic in recent AMA proceedings (Berry and Kehoe 1980, Matthews and Blackwell 1980, Taylor 1982, Thistlewaite 1982, Allen and Peters 1983, Hawes and Glisan 1980, Frisbie and Petroshius 1985, and Razzouk, Johar, and Voight 1985).

The university selection process has been examined by Razzouk, Johar, and Voigt (1985). They describe the evaluative criteria and the influential others affecting the university choice of students at a private and a public university. Frisbie and Petroshius (1985) describe the factors influencing student choice of college majors.

Powell and Rich's (1985) exploratory research on student textbook satisfaction is a singular example of the textbook being considered as a component of this product offering. While their research showed a high level of student satisfaction, 67% of the students in their survey described textbooks as meeting their needs well or very well, their research did not tap another consuming component of the textbook market: the faculty members who select the textbooks.

As described by Powell and Rich (1985), the current consumer activity of students selling books at the end of their courses is inconsistent with the current

needs of publishers for increased sales volume. As publishers attempt to limit the used text market with the introduction of more new books and increased frequency of editions, the question remains as to how effectively does the product offering meet the needs of the faculty member teaching the course.

The textbook purchasing process remains a relatively uncommon type of consumer behavior in that the consumer does not actually select the product. This purchasing behavior which parallels pharmaceuticals allows the "authority," the professor like the physician, to select the product which is then to be purchased by the consumer. Textbook sales are approached through missionary (detail) selling procedures with initially the advantages to the decision maker considered more crucial than those to the actual consumer.

Textbook publishing is the most profitable aspect of the book business because "prices are high, the market is relatively stable, and author's fees and manufacturing costs are relatively low" (Fortune 1984, p. 9). The publishing industry considers profitability to be a "function of volume" (Standard and Poor's Industry Surveys 1984, p. 85). In contrast to operating profits of 6.3 percent of sales for trade books, college textbook profits averaged 25.5 percent of sales in 1983 (Fortune 1984). Textbook sales to colleges in 1983 were estimated at \$1.2 billion with sales to elementary schools at \$1.15 billion (U.S. Industrial Outlook 1984). Due to the industry's emphasis on volume, textbook editions proliferate rapidly. Over eight hundred new business textbooks and 282 new editions were introduced in 1982 alone (Bowker Annual 1983).

The market for business textbooks is a favorite with publishers, largely due to the more than 2.5 million students enrolled in American business schools (Statistical Abstract of the United States 1984). Yet, what research has been done on textbook selection criteria is proprietary and company specific. The

research presented in this paper is an initial examination of the textbook selection process used by college and university faculty members. It will attempt to describe the overall level of need satisfaction currently being provided by textbooks and the criteria used by professors in selecting textbooks.

PROCEDURE

Subjects for the study were 317 college and university professors from geographically dispersed schools throughout the United States. Thirty eight percent of the respondents were full professors, 33 percent associate professors, 19 percent assistant professors, and 10 percent were instructors. Diverse disciplines were represented, with 31.1 percent of respondents teaching science, 24.9 percent business, and 24.6 percent math.

The respondents taught an average of 5.53 classes per calendar year. Approximately half of these classes (49.1%) were introductory classes.

The questionnaire was developed from personal interviews with college and university professors, sales representatives from textbook publishers, and industry editors and researchers. From this information a list of 20 textbook selection criteria was developed. Respondents were asked how important each criterion was in their selection of a textbook. In addition, questions on the selection process, general satisfaction with textbooks, and descriptive information were included.

FINDINGS

The selection process for textbooks is different from many other purchase situations in that the decision maker is not the actual purchaser or consumer. The professor in selecting a textbook can be expected to use different selection criteria than that used by an individual book purchaser.

Textbook Decision Making

Some insight into this selection process can be gleaned from the information shown in Table 1. Textbook selection is typically made 2 to 5 months before actual use. It was found that 38.3 percent of the respondents made the selection decision 2 to 3 months in advance, with 39.0 percent making it 4 to 5 months in advance.

This delay between selection and actual use creates an interesting marketing situation as to reinforcement of the purchase decision. Additionally, the selection situation of choosing a text for one course as one has just begun a different course suggests that promotion clearly tied to selection criteria would ease the information gathering and ultimately the textbook selection.

Once a text is adopted, it is not easily relinquished for a different text. Over one third of the respondents (37.1%) preferred changing textbooks or editions only every three years. Thirty percent would change texts every two years and 15.4 percent would not change texts more often than every four years. Only 1.3 percent were willing to change texts for each term.

With 52.5 percent of the respondents not willing to change texts more frequently than every three to four years, the textbook industry's attempts at a two year edition cycle may need to be examined as to general consumer acceptance.

Decision making for advanced texts is almost totally (94.2%) made by the individual professor. On the other hand, the selection of introductory texts is fairly evenly divided between individual and group decisions. The recognition of the buy group as decision maker for introductory texts becomes crucial in that 45.9 percent of introductory texts were selected by committee.

TABLE 1

Textbook Decision Making

Selection Lead Time

1 month or less	3.2%
2-3 months	38.3%
4-5 months	39.0%
6 or more months	19.5%

Frequency of Changing Texts

every term	1.3%
every year	16.4%
every 2 years	29.8%
every 3 years	37.1%
not more often than every 4 years	15.4%

Decision Maker for Introductory Texts

Committee	45.9%
Individual	54.1%

Decision Maker for Advanced Texts

Committee	5.8%
Individual	94.2%

We can, therefore, conclude that the decision making process for the selection of textbooks is largely made several months in advance of actual use. For any one course this decision is likely to be repeated only every three to four years. For advanced courses it will be typically an individual decision. For introductory courses textbook selection is a group decision in nearly half of the situations.

Faculty Satisfaction

The data suggest that current textbook offerings provide a very high level of need satisfaction. Nearly three quarters of the professors surveyed stated that textbooks were meeting their needs well or very well (Table 2). Only 9.4 percent stated that textbooks were poorly meeting their needs.

With 73.7 percent of the faculty members describing textbooks as meeting their needs, it is demonstrated that faculty members are at least as satisfied as students with the current textbook offering. Powell and Rich (1985) found 67 percent of business students to be satisfied with their textbooks.

Textbook Selection Criteria

Table 3 presents the selection criteria most used by professors in deciding upon textbooks. Overwhelmingly, textbook characteristics that are largely determined by the skill and knowledge of the author were considered the most crucial. Of most importance to the respondents was the range of topics covered by the text. Over 92 percent of the respondents rated the range of topics as always or usually important to them in choosing a text.

For 79.6 percent of the respondents the writing style was typically used as a criterion of selection. Thus, the author's decision as to topics and the author's writing style were shown to be the most important selection criteria for this sample.

TABLE 2

Ability of Textbooks to Meet
Professors' Needs

very well	7.8
well	65.9
uncertain	16.9
poorly	7.1
very poorly	2.3

n = 308

Over half of the respondents (55.4%) use newness of the edition as a determining characteristic. This in all likelihood reflects the previously mentioned desire to limit the changing of texts to only every two to three years.

Interestingly, the use of graphics, the reputation of the author, and the instructor's manual were crucial to the selection process in less than half the cases. Yet, these attributes of the textbook package often seem to be the most heavily described by the publishers' representatives. Graphics entered into the decision for 49.1 percent of the respondents. The author's reputation was a consideration for 40 percent of the respondents. Only 25.7 percent mentioned the instructor's manual as a decision criterion.

Thus, from Table 3 it becomes evident that for this sample, the author generated characteristics of material covered and the manner in which that material was covered were the most important in determining textbook adoptions.

Components of the product offering that are rarely used in the textbook selection process are shown in Table 4. The ability of the publisher's representative is seen by 79.4 percent of the respondents as having little influence on their selection of a textbook.

Also rarely used in determining which textbook to adopt is the school of the author and personal knowledge of the author. Over three quarters (77%) of the respondents said that they never or rarely used the author's school to determine the value of a textbook. Knowing the author was likewise not often used in selection process. Nearly 65 percent of the respondents did not use personal knowledge of the author as one of the decision criteria.

The currently ubiquitous peripheral materials that seem to accompany every textbook offering were little used in the actual selection of textbooks. Seventy-three percent mentioned transparencies as of little importance in the decision

TABLE 3

Criteria Used in Textbook Selection*

range of topics	92.4%
writing style	79.6%
newness of edition	55.4%
use of graphics	49.1%
reputation of the author	40.0%
book length	33.2%
instructor's manual	25.7%

*respondents answering always or usually

TABLE 4

Selection Criteria Rarely Used*

skill of book rep	79.4%
school of author	77.0%
transparencies	73.0%
personal knowledge of author	64.7%
services of publishers	64.5%
accompanying software	63.8%
leaves topics to cover in lectures	61.4%
promotional material	59.4%
student workbook	58.9%
instructor's manual	57.9%
use of color	48.9%

*respondents answering never or rarely

process. For 63.8 percent of the respondents computer software to accompany a text was rarely, if ever, used as a decision criterion. Likewise, student workbooks and instructor's manuals were unimportant to nearly sixty percent (59.4% and 58.9%) of the professors.

IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Textbooks are an essential part of the product of higher education being offered by colleges and universities. As we extend the marketing concept and marketing strategy to higher education it is important that all components of the product offering be included. For this reason further knowledge of the selection process and the level of need satisfaction seems crucial to the strategic positioning of textbooks as an integral component of current educational packages.

The results of this study suggest that textbooks are meeting the needs of the majority of faculty members. This implies that publishers are offering the necessary variety and quality of textbooks. Additionally, the authors of texts would seem to be aware of the typically desired course topics and that their writing styles meet the expectations of the faculty members.

Of interest to publishers should be the findings that the often promoted characteristics of textbooks are rarely used in the actual selection of textbooks. The meet-the-author parties and the promotion of the prestige of the author's school should be re-examined as to effectiveness. Likewise, for this sample the much promoted peripheral materials, such as transparencies, computer software, workbooks, and instructor's manuals seemed to have little influence on the decision process.

Because of the exploratory nature of this study, the findings may be viewed as only suggestive. Further research is needed to verify these findings and to expand the sample. Of interest would be additional studies as to how a listing

of subject topics and how author's writing style is actually evaluated. Additionally, further research could aid in segmenting the market as to different expectations of edition cycle time, topics desired, and expected writing style.

In conclusion, textbooks are an important component of the educational product being offered by colleges and universities. To a large extent the currently offered textbooks are meeting the needs of the professors teaching the courses. Yet, as textbook industry competition increases and as edition cycle times shorten, the textbook package must constantly be reassessed for its need satisfying characteristics.

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