

Marketing Content that Resonates: An Exploratory Investigation of College Students' "Favorite" Marketing Content

Charles L. Martin¹ & Marilyn H. Martin²

Abstract

This article summarizes the initial exploratory phase of an investigation to identify the characteristics of marketing content that resonate with marketing students. Ninety-seven graduate and undergraduate students were asked to vote for their five "favorite" stories among 732 stories included in the 2017 edition of *Marketing For All the Marbles Every day* (i.e., *Marketing FAME*). Respondents identified a wide range of "favorites," with 239 stories receiving one or more votes and only one story receiving as many as nine votes. Respondents' comments explaining their rationale for their "favorites" suggested multiple criteria were used in the selection process -- including personal, individual-specific criteria. Stories judged to be informative, important, and personally relevant were often categorized as "favorites," as were stories about people, events, brands and organizations with which respondents were familiar. Given the exploratory and non-conclusive nature of the investigation, several of respondents' "favorite" stories are included in the Appendix to enable readers to scrutinize the content for themselves and reach their own conclusions.

Keywords: Calendar-led marketing, *Marketing FAME*, Storytelling, Marketing content, Communication, Reading comprehension

1. Introduction

At the beginning of each school semester or term, professional educators -- including those who teach marketing -- know that the course's content already resonates with some of their students, while other students must be engaged, persuaded or otherwise motivated to connect with the subject matter. While teachers may vary in their willingness and ability to sway unconvinced students, intuition suggests and research confirms that learning is enhanced when readers enjoy the content of what they're reading, *ceteris paribus* (Handley, 2014; Miller, 2017). Moreover, students may avoid textbooks or other reading assignments altogether if they fail to connect with the content. It follows that educators want to adopt textbooks and assign reading materials that resonate with students without sacrificing learning objectives -- content that students enjoy reading and find interesting, informative, valuable, relevant, or otherwise personally rewarding. Similarly, it's easy to infer that content creators, such as textbook authors and publishers, want to develop content that resonates with students.

Accordingly, the research team's quest is to understand why some published content seems to resonate more strongly with students than other content and with some students more so than with other students. Toward this end, we undertook an exploratory investigation to identify possible reasons that might explain why a relatively new book series, *Marketing For All the Marbles Every day* (or *Marketing FAME*, for short) has resonated so well with college students who have been assigned to read it. According to the series' website, 100 percent of surveyed students who have read *Marketing FAME* agree or strongly agree that it is "informative," while almost as many report that it is "interesting" (94%) and "valuable" (89%) (www.MarketingMarbles.com).

¹ Professor of Marketing in the W. Frank Barton School of Business, Wichita State University, Campus Box 84, Wichita, Kansas 67260 USA, Email: Charles.martin@wichita.edu, Telephone: (316) 978-7104

² Communications Coordinator at CIBER Publications, P.O. Box 571, Derby, Kansas 67037 USA

2. More about *Marketing FAME*

First published in 2017, *Marketing For All the Marbles Every day* -- or *Marketing FAME* for short -- is an annual series that is used primarily as an ancillary book in both introductory and advanced courses across the marketing curriculum (Martin, 2017). Created as an informative series that students enjoy reading, *Marketing FAME*'s reader-friendly, example-anchored content reinforces and extends the relevance of important concepts, principles, practices and insights while engaging students with its succinct, real-world and occasionally humorous presentation style. By accentuating the dynamic, colorful and sometimes amusing nature of marketing, *Marketing FAME* simultaneously engages, informs, challenges and inspires readers. Additional information about how *Marketing FAME* is uniquely positioned and differentiated from traditional textbooks may be found in the foreword section of each edition and on the series' website, www.MarketingMarbles.com.

Marketing FAME has been characterized as a "daily planner with marketing-relevant content" -- an average of about 300 words of content for each day of the year. Content is meaningfully linked to the corresponding day of the year -- highlighting the events and people that have shaped marketing practice. Featured events include modern-day and historical innovations, as well as recurring occasions such as holidays and seasonal phenomena that heighten readers' awareness of numerous windows of marketing opportunity that open throughout the year. Featured people include those whose experiences, accomplishments and insights also contribute to marketing thought and practice -- sometimes reinforcing and sometimes challenging conventional wisdom. On the series' website, *Marketing FAME*'s author, Charles L. Martin, explains: "Thanks to the cumulative efforts and insights of thousands of individuals and organizations from multiple generations throughout the world, the marketing profession has evolved into its present state. *Marketing FAME* summarizes many of these contributions for the benefit of readers who aspire to be businesspeople, in general, or marketing professionals, in particular."

The 2017 edition was organized into daily doses of brief stand-alone sections or "stories" distributed across 365 days -- a total of 732 stories representing a wide variety of marketing- and business-relevant topics involving 720 individuals, 683 organizations and brands, 48 U.S. states and 59 countries. The average (mean) length of the 732 stories is about 150 words. The detailed index with more than 6,000 entries lists the numerous topics/issues addressed in the 2017 edition. Sample stories and the detailed index are currently available on the series' website, www.MarketingMarbles.com.

Overwhelmingly, both undergraduate and graduate students who have read *Marketing FAME* contend that it represents a unique reading experience that is informative, interesting and valuable. Surveyed students are emphatic that *Marketing FAME* does not read like a textbook. Students' rating statistics and dozens of their evaluative comments about *Marketing FAME* may be found on the "Students' Comments" page of the series' website, www.MarketingMarbles.com

3. Methodology

Students in four sections of marketing management courses at an AACSB-accredited urban university of about 15,000 students located in the Midwestern United States were asked to participate in an exploratory survey. Three of these sections consisted of graduate students enrolled in the core marketing management course required of all MBA students. These sections consisted of about equal proportions of males and females, and those who had or had not previously earned an undergraduate degree in business (with few exceptions, MBA students without an undergraduate business degree were required to take an introductory marketing half-course before enrolling in the marketing management class).

The fourth section consisted of undergraduate students enrolled in the capstone marketing management course -- predominantly college seniors with an average of about 12 hours (four courses) of previously completed marketing coursework to their credit -- typically including an introductory marketing course, consumer behavior and marketing research courses, and an elective such as retailing, personal selling and sales management, promotion management, or services marketing.

The survey was administered near the end of the semester -- after students had presumably read the 2017 edition of *Marketing FAME* and had taken multiple exams over the content. To encourage participation, students were promised and awarded points for responding -- points that could positively affect their final grade in the course. Surveyed students were first asked to select five of their "favorite" stories from the 732 stories in the 2017 edition of *Marketing FAME*.

For each story selected, students were also asked to write a brief paragraph explaining why that story was selected as one of their favorites. To encourage frank feedback, students were instructed to use whatever criteria they deemed appropriate to determine their “favorite” stories and that the intent of the survey was to understand their personal preferences, i.e., it was made clear that there were no “right” or “wrong” responses. To provide ample opportunity for students to refer to their copies of *Marketing FAME*, reflect upon the book’s content and formulate their evaluative comments, students were allowed several days to respond. Not surprisingly, the overwhelming majority of students enrolled in the four sections submitted their responses – resulting in a final sample size of 97, including 73 MBA students and 24 undergraduate students. Given the high response rate, no systematic analyses for non-response biases were conducted, although there were no apparent non-response biases in terms of respondents’ gender, classification (junior, senior, graduate students), undergraduate degree (i.e., for business versus non-business undergraduate degree for graduate students) or other bases.

4. Results and discussion

With each respondent voting for five of their “favorite” stories, a total of 485 votes were cast – spread across a total of 239 stories. Most (207) of these 239 “favorites” were dubbed so by one to three students, while 12 stories received four votes each, 11 received five votes, five received six votes, three received eight votes, and one received nine votes. Several stories receiving five or more votes are included in the Appendix. The broad distribution of responses suggests that different content resonates with different students – perhaps for a variety of reasons including situational factors and personal characteristics of students that have little or nothing to do with content, per se. As examples, students who are hungry when reading *Marketing FAME* may be positively predisposed toward food-related stories, while students who are interested in a particular sport may gravitate toward stories that feature events or athletes in that sport. At the extreme, it may be that there is no such thing as content that resonates independently; content may resonate only when found at the intersection with situational factors and/or readers’ personal characteristics.

Students’ evaluative comments to justify their “favorite” selections were read and carefully considered by members of the research team with the intent of understanding why some stories were selected more frequently than others. Are the reasons entirely story-specific or are there some common story traits that distinguish “favorite” stories -- as a group -- from other stories? More broadly, students’ comments were scrutinized to garner possible insights regarding the criteria students may use to evaluate the content they are asked to read. Given the exploratory nature of the study’s objectives, conclusive answers were not expected, but a few common threads did seem to be woven through the fabric of the respondents’ “favorite” stories. These threads are discussed in the following paragraphs in no particular order – offered as tentative observations to be more definitively tested in future research.

First, stories were often, and perhaps most frequently justified as favorites because they were viewed as informative – especially when the information was perceived to be useful, such as information that was relevant to the respondent’s job or clearly actionable. Some stories that presented unique information that amazed, surprised or persuaded respondents also were among the favorites and accompanied by comments like “I didn’t know it was such a huge issue” or “I would have never guessed that the brand started that way.”

Second, stories viewed as important often garnered “favorite” status. Students who voted for these stories as favorites often commented that the content should not be ignored, would be indispensable, and that students “should” know more about the topic. In some instances, stories were dubbed as “favorites” if they were believed to be important, but also were neglected or under-covered in the curriculum, such as the April 11 story about sexual harassment.

Third, several respondents seemed to gravitate toward stories that featured people with whom they shared a common background or people and places that they could relate to on a personal level. Often noted were people featured in a story who were born on the same day of the year or who grew up in the same community or region as the respondent. As examples, one student took pride in his hometown producing a successful businessman featured in a story and another noted, “I’ve been there.” Stories pertaining to celebrities or athletes sometimes gained “favorite” status too – with respondents noting their admiration of the celebrity or affinity with the sport.

Similarly, there seemed to be a strong affinity toward industries, organizations, and product categories or brands with which respondents were familiar. Examples: Stories pertaining to historically iconic brands such as Coca-Cola, Disney, M&M’s (candy), and General Motors tended to be mentioned as “favorites” more so than stories about less-familiar brands.

Many students who worked in the aviation industry (a major employer in the local community) dubbed stories about aviation pioneers or innovations as “favorites.” Fifth, stories that evoked an emotional response were often included on respondents’ “favorites” lists. Inspirational success stories or stories about people overcoming adversity or dealing with tragedy were mentioned frequently. Several holiday-related stories also seemed to evoke emotions for many respondents who recalled fond memories of past Christmas celebrations, family gatherings for Mother’s Day or Thanksgiving Day, joyful Halloween experiences as children, and so on.

One story (included in the Appendix) about a controversial advertising campaign that used a convicted killer’s name – Charles Manson – initially outraged at least one respondent, but the outrage provoked her thinking to the point that the story’s learning lesson became etched in her mind. Thus, the story became one of her favorites not because she liked the character in the story or approved of his behavior, but because the story was instrumental in helping her to learn what she believed to be highly relevant. The tragic story of the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing (also included in the Appendix) also stirred students’ emotions and provoked thought.

Finally, considering the varied career aspirations of surveyed students, stories providing specific guidance for practicing marketing professionals may not have resonated as strongly with students not interested in being practicing marketers. Rather, several stories may have been selected as “favorites” because students could relate to them on more of a personal or lifestyle level instead -- as consumers. At least three stories found in the Appendix serve as examples: The January 2 story about New Year’s resolutions, the May 27 story about college graduates, and the Earth Day story about product disposal.

5. Summary and concluding thoughts

This article summarizes the initial exploratory phase of an investigation to identify the characteristics of marketing content that resonate with marketing students. Ninety-seven graduate and undergraduate students were asked to vote for their five “favorite” stories among 732 stories included in the 2017 edition of *Marketing FAME* (Martin, 2017). Not surprisingly, respondents identified a wide range of “favorites,” with 239 stories receiving one or more votes and only one story receiving as many as nine votes. Respondents’ comments explaining their rationale for their “favorites” suggested that content could resonate for a variety of reasons and that students used multiple criteria in the selection process -- including personal, individual-specific criteria.

Although the findings reported in this article are not conclusive (as the study is purely exploratory in nature), marketing educators may wish to consider them when selecting textbooks and other reading materials for their students. Not surprisingly, marketing educators are likely to find that learning is enhanced when students enjoy what they read. Authors and publishers also may wish to consider the findings when developing reading materials for student consumption. Further, readers interested in developing their own insights about the characteristics of reading material that resonate with students may benefit from reading the selected *Marketing FAME* stories included in the Appendix. The stories in the Appendix are excerpted from the 2017 edition of *Marketing FAME* (with permission) and each received “favorite” status by five or more respondents.

6. Appendix: Selected “favorite” stories from the 2017 edition of *Marketing FAME*

6.1 Marketing & New Year’s resolutions

U.S. consumers make an average of 1.8 resolutions each New Year. New Year’s resolutions most frequently pertain to health and fitness (22%), career (18%), personal growth and interests (15%), personal finance (11%), time management (11%), family and relationships (8%), education (6%), home improvement and real estate (5%), or recreation and leisure (3%). Women are slightly more likely than men to make New Year’s resolutions. Not surprisingly, around the first of the year while consumers are thinking about resolutions, marketers are likely to find receptive audiences for advertisements and other marketing communications that tie-in with consumers’ desire to achieve or change.

Resolution affiliations

Notice this month’s ads for these companies and brands, and how the ads relate to New Year’s resolutions: (1) Nicorette (stop smoking), (2) H&R Block (improve/control finances), (3) Weight Watchers (lose weight), (4) Bally Total Fitness (exercise more), and (5) Monster.com (find a better job).

But, as the New Year's celebrations fade away, New Year's resolutions are likely to fade away as well if consumers lack the commitment to follow-through and make their resolutions a reality. One *USA Today* survey suggested that 23 percent of New Year's resolutions don't survive the first week of January and 45 percent don't survive the month. Fortunately, marketers can play an important role in strengthening consumers' resolution resolve.

Some consumers may have not yet considered New Year's resolutions at all, or none particularly relevant to the marketer's product category. In these instances, consumers may be quite receptive to relevant resolutions businesses might suggest. For example, Prudential Investments recommends three "financial resolutions" to their customers: (1) "Review and rebalance your portfolio," (2) "Keep your education savings plan on track," and (3) "Rely on professional financial guidance." Prudential's newsletter, *Advised Choices* offers specific guidelines and suggestions to help customers pursue those resolutions.

6.2 Observation and innovation

The potential to learn from customers is huge -- by asking them questions, listening to their questions and comments, and observing their behavior. Indeed, observation was the informal learning technique that Sylvan Goldman, the Humpty Dumpty supermarket manager in Oklahoma City used when he noticed that many female customers would bring their own shopping baskets into the store. They would walk around the store, fill their baskets, and then leave the store. Rarely would they purchase more than their baskets would hold.

To make the shopping experience a little easier for customers and to encourage a higher volume of purchases, Goldman asked handyman Fred Young to design a shopping cart. Young made several carts by attaching two baskets on a metal folding chair and then mounting the chair on casters. The shopping carts were first placed near the store's entrance on June 4, 1937. But, because the innovation clashed with existing customer behavior, customers tended not to use them.

Understanding the psychology involved in the adoption of new tools and new behaviors, Goldman hired people to push filled shopping carts around the store. Seeing other people use the carts prompted customers to do the same. Today, the use of shopping carts is widespread.

Alternative uses

Innovations can serve multiple purposes. In Bratislava, Slovakia, for example, some grocery stores use shopping carts as a method of crowd control. Because stores and aisles are smaller than those typically found in the U.S., only a limited number of customers are allowed in the store to shop at the same time. To control the customer flow, shoppers are expected to use a basket or cart provided by the store. So, the stores limit the number of customers in the store by limiting the number of carts and baskets available. During busy periods, customers wait next to the check-out aisles to recycle the baskets and carts given up by exiting customers.

6.3 Super Bowl

The final football game of the postseason -- the Super Bowl -- and the festivities that surround it have made the first Sunday in February a *de facto* national holiday in the United States. The annual championship game began in 1967, but has evolved into more than simply a football game. Today, Super Bowl Sunday (SBS) also means food, parties, half-time entertainment, and the launch of dazzling new advertising campaigns.

For television advertisers, the Super Bowl provides the opportunity to reach an estimated 80 to 90 million Americans (130-140 million watch at least a portion of the game). Almost half of the viewers are women. Given the large audience, a 30-second ad spot during the Super Bowl can cost a few million dollars.

Since 1984 when Apple Computer successfully used the Super Bowl to introduce its Macintosh computer, dozens of firms have used extravagant commercials during the Super Bowl to introduce new products or new campaigns. Interestingly, the Super Bowl is one of the very few television programs that attracts an audience specifically interested in watching the commercials.

Rolling the dice: Agree or disagree?

Over the years, some dot.coms and other firms have chosen to spend all or almost all of their annual advertising budgets on a single Super Bowl advertisement. Good idea?

Food and parties are closely associated with the Super Bowl. Except for Thanksgiving Day, more food is consumed in the U.S. on SBS than on any other day of the year. SBS is Domino's (pizza) busiest day of the year; they deliver about 1.2 million pizzas on SBS (about twice as many as an average Sunday). The Snack Food Association estimates that more than 30 million pounds of snacks are eaten on SBS. And, according to The Beer Institute and other estimates, almost 3.5 percent of annual beer sales are tallied during the week leading up to SBS -- an incremental increase of 900,000 cases.

6.4 Happy birthday: Mr. Potato Head

The most famous spud in the world was born on February 5, 1952. Shortly thereafter he helped to revolutionize the toy business by being the first toy advertised on network television. The advertising exposure not only boosted sales, but may have had something to do with him meeting and marrying Mrs. Potato Head in 1953. Since those early days, Mr. Potato Head has extended his exposure by: (1) helping to cross-promote other products offered by his parent company [e.g., Children's Educational Software], (2) endorsing other organizations' products in advertising [e.g., Burger King French fries], (3) supporting non-profit causes, e.g., in 1987 he gave up his pipe and became the official "spokespud" for the Great American Smokeout sponsored by the American Cancer Society, and (4) appearing in television programs and movies, e.g., *Toy Story*, *Toy Story 2*.

Three children's markets

Today, advertising to children is common, as marketers recognize the enormous potential of reaching these *three* markets.

1. Children as *direct purchasers*, who collectively spend billions of dollars of their own money.
2. Children as *influencers*, who frequently attempt to sway family purchase decisions for food products, household items, and even automobiles. Similarly, children are not shy in offering product and brand suggestions to Santa Claus and other gift-givers.
3. Children as *future adults*. Research confirms that when consumers are exposed to brands as children, they are more likely to develop or maintain a loyalty to those brands as adults than if they were not exposed to the same brands until adulthood.

6.5 "Plop, plop; fizz, fizz..."

Accompanied by heavy radio advertising, Alka Seltzer was introduced by Miles Laboratories on February 21, 1931. The antacid and headache remedy enjoyed moderate sales success for several years, but sales accelerated when advertising and packaging were used to increase users' rate of consumption. The new ad campaign always showed *two* Alka Seltzer tablets dropped into a glass of water -- implying that users too should use two tablets. The accompanying jingle reinforced the desired behavior: "Plop, plop; fizz, fizz. Oh, what a relief it is!" Similarly, packaging of Alka Seltzer tablets prompted increased consumption; *two* tablets were packaged in each foil. Today, marketers use several techniques to encourage buyers to use more product and use it more frequently. Here are a few examples:

1. Larger serving sizes. For example, consumers tend to eat larger quantities of cookies when they are larger-sized.
2. Permission sizes. Implying that it's okay or normal to choose larger quantities prompts consumers to do so. For example, consumers gravitate toward larger soft drink sizes when the choices are "small," "regular," and "large," rather than when the same alternatives are referred to as "regular," "large" and "extra-large."
3. Perishability. If the unused portion of product is likely to spoil, we tend to go ahead and consume it.
4. Awkward packaging. If the package is destroyed when opened (like the packaging of some sandwich cookies), consumers may go ahead and use the entire amount rather than search for an alternative container to store the unused portion.
5. Discounts. If one item sells for a dollar, but three cost only two dollars, many consumers opt to buy three and then consume three.
6. Taste. When food products are tasty, larger quantities are frequently eaten.
7. Alternative uses. Like Alka Seltzer (antacid *and* headache remedy), multiple uses means more reasons to consume.
8. Variety. Additional flavors, colors, or styles help to avoid consumer boredom and stimulate additional consumption.

6.6 Happy birthday: Charles Rudolph Walgreen, Sr.

Born near Galesburg, Illinois on October 9, 1873, Walgreen landed a job in a drug store at the age of 16 – for four dollars a week. Soon after that, he moved to Chicago and gained valuable experience working for several other pharmacists. For eight years he saved his money and noted how he would someday run a drug store differently. That someday arrived in 1901 when Walgreen agreed to buy the drug store where he worked, for \$6,000.

Almost immediately, he began implementing marketing-oriented improvements. For example, he installed bright lights and widened store aisles to create a more welcoming and comfortable atmosphere. Further, customers were personally welcomed when they entered the store – either by Walgreen himself, or by his trusted colleague, Arthur Thorsen.

Walgreen also used prompt service to differentiate his drug store further. In particular, one practice amazed customers. When a customer would phone-in an order, Walgreen would repeat the order loudly enough for his assistant to hear. While Walgreen continued to chat with the customer, his assistant delivered the merchandise to the customer's home. Customers were so impressed with the quick service that they told their friends about how Walgreen's could fill and deliver an order before hanging up the telephone.

Advertising with service: “Little extra services are the cheapest kind of advertising that merely takes thought and a few seconds of time.” – Charles R. Walgreen

Needless to say, the positive word-of-mouth generated by Walgreen's merchandising and service innovations helped to grow the business. In 1909, Walgreen opened a second store, then seven others by 1916. By 1926, the chain had grown to 100 stores – by 1994, 2000 stores, by 2003, 4,000 stores, and more than 8,200 stores by 2014.

6.7 Apple begins new tradition

The final and climactic American football game of the season, Super Bowl XVIII, was played on January 23, 1984. For the marketing team at Apple Computer, the game represented an ideal opportunity to reach a huge audience (today 130-140 million people watch at least a portion of the big game) to announce the introduction of its Macintosh computer. Apple seized the opportunity by having Chiat/Day, Inc. ad agency produce an ad for \$1.5 million to be shown during the game. Dubbed “1984” after the same-named futuristic novel written by George Orwell several years earlier, the commercial featured a large screen showing an enthused orator speaking to a captive audience, presumably prisoners. Spliced through the commercial were cuts of a female runner carrying a large hammer as she ran toward the screen. As the orator reached the climactic assertion of his speech, “We shall prevail,” the runner hurled the hammer and shattered the screen – showering the audience with a burst of white light. At that point, the voice-over narrator explained: “On January 24, Apple Computer will introduce Macintosh. And you'll see why 1984 [the year] won't be like 1984 [the book].”

Apple ad dubbed one of the best

As the 20th century came to a close, *Advertising Age* magazine identified what it considered to be the top ads of the century. Apple's “1984” ad was 12th on the list.

By so dramatically communicating that consumers were no longer captive to competing computers, the commercial helped Apple's revolutionary Macintosh get off to a strong start. The effectiveness of the ad was noticed by other firms who in subsequent years began showcasing their new products and promotional campaigns with extravagant commercials first aired during the Super Bowl. Today, the Super Bowl is one of the few television broadcasts that attracts an audience segment that is interested in watching the ads.

6.8 Happy Birthday: John Daniel Hertz

Born on April 10, 1879, Hertz had several successes in the automobile industry -- selling automobiles, manufacturing them, and running a taxicab service. Today, his name is most often associated with the automobile rental firm he acquired in 1923 -- first named the Yellow Drive-It-Yourself Company, then changed to the more familiar Hertz Rent-A-Car in 1953. Today, Hertz Corporation is the largest vehicle-renting company in the world -- with a fleet of 667,000 vehicles and more than 29,000 employees scattered across 145 countries. The rationale behind Hertz's innovative concept of the Drive-It-Yourself taxicab is akin to self-service options available today in dozens of product and service categories. By substituting paid labor (e.g., paid taxicab drivers) for consumer labor, Hertz was able to drive-down operating costs, which enabled him to lower prices and thus expand the market.

Of course, not all customers prefer self-service and some are not able to perform the tasks required. However, since Hertz's self-service innovation, marketers have learned that many customers do opt for self-service – partially for price discounts, but for other reasons too. When tasks are easy and familiar, customers may be able to provide the service more quickly themselves, e.g., looking up account information on the company's website at midnight rather than waiting until the next day to talk to a human service representative. In other instances, customers may *perceive* self-service to be quicker, even if it isn't, i.e., if they are engaged in a self-service task rather than simply waiting, time seems to pass quickly. When creativity or customization is involved, customers' self-service may be more in line with what they specifically want, such as preparing one's own salad at a salad bar. When more skill or time is required of self-service customers, an added degree of ownership pride may follow the self-provision of tasks, e.g., assembly of a bicycle or piece of furniture. Further, in the case of rental cars, customers may prefer the sense of privacy or control they feel when they drive themselves.

6.9 Congratulations graduates!

Graduation from high school or college is a joyous occasion for graduates and their families. Each year in the U.S., more than five million students earn high school diplomas or college degrees. Most graduate about this time of year. For businesses interested in capitalizing on the graduation phenomenon, there are at least two levels of marketing opportunities to consider: (1) the graduation ceremonies themselves and accompanying celebrations, and (2) the transition market.

Graduations and celebrations. The graduation event itself represents obvious marketing opportunities for caps, gowns, invitations, and so on, but there are also opportunities for marketers of food, decorations, and entertainment that accompany the celebration parties. A demand bubble for travel and hospitality also accompanies graduation as out-of-town friends and families travel to attend the festivities. And, of course, there's the market for a wide variety of gifts which neither graduates nor marketers want to miss.

The transition market. Intertwined with graduation gift-giving and reinforced by graduation speeches that talk about "going out into the world," is the transition phenomenon associated with graduation. Almost by definition "graduation" means "completion," and when one thing is completed another begins. Soon after the ceremony and hoopla subside, most graduates move on to a new set of goals, new aspirations, and a new lifestyle. For some, that means more schooling (e.g., from high school to college, or college to graduate school). For others, it may mean a new job to launch a new career, which could also mean moving to a new community.

Many graduates who made a habit of postponing purchases and lifestyle changes while in school find themselves spending heavily immediately after graduation. They may invest in cars, houses, furniture, wardrobes, and so on. They may delay marriage, babies, and/or moving to distant communities until after they graduate. And recent graduates may find themselves suddenly in the market for insurance, utilities, and other things that Mom and Dad previously purchased for them. All of these changes imply tremendous opportunities for businesses that catch graduates in transition. And businesses that are first to reach consumers in transition tend to have an advantage over those that introduce themselves later.

Be your own marbleous graduate!

"A graduation ceremony is an event where the commencement speaker tells thousands of students dressed in identical caps and gowns that 'individuality' is the key to success." – Robert Orben

6.10 Remembering Oklahoma City

On April 19, 1995, a truck bomb exploded outside of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. The devastating blast destroyed the building, injured more than 500 people and killed 168 – including 17 children.

Remembering this event, as well as other man-made tragedies (e.g., Pearl Harbor attack of December 7, 1941, and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001) serves at least three purposes. First, on a very basic human level, it reminds us how fragile life is and how quickly our individual worlds can change. Recognizing this we can express our deepest sympathies for the families and communities directly affected by the tragedy. Second, as businesspeople, we're reminded of the realities of the world in which we live. Necessary steps to ensure the safety and security of employees and customers must be taken, and must be taken seriously.

Third, from a calendar planning perspective, some dates -- like this one -- may be handled best as “off limits” or “low profile” days. That is, to use another metaphor, allow the memory of the tragedy to remain “center stage.” Especially in the local communities where memories of the tragedies are strongest, consider scheduling traditional sale events, grand opening celebrations, new product announcements, employee contests, and so on, on *other* days. Possible exceptions might be company efforts to participate in the community’s observance/healing process, such as the distribution of free ribbons or arm bands to commemorate the event, or the use of company locations as collection points for food, clothing and other needed items to be given to victims. Higher-profile activities with obvious commercial intentions are likely to be regarded negatively.

Your community, your markets

What tragedies have occurred in the geographic markets that your company serves that you may want to note on your calendar and tastefully commemorate?

6.11 Summer is here!

Today marks the beginning of summer in the Northern Hemisphere – the year with the most daylight hours, generally accompanied by warm or hot temperatures for the three-month summer season that follows.

For seasonal products and businesses, shifts in demand are likely to coincide with changes in the seasons. Obviously, sales demand for swim-wear, lawn and garden equipment, air conditioners, family vacations (while children are out of school), and many outdoor sporting activities are higher in summer than in winter. For many products, however, seasonal variation in demand can be much less apparent, but real nonetheless. That’s why it is useful to examine a company’s or product category’s historical sales records to identify seasonal peaks and valleys in demand.

Once seasonal demand patterns are detected, appropriate actions may be taken. These may include efforts to:

- 1 Adjust inventory levels to match forecasted demand.
- 2 Accelerate the arrival of the selling season and beat competitors to customers by promoting and displaying seasonal items prior to the start of the season.
- 3 Extend the buying season by identifying and promoting alternative product uses that are less seasonally-related (e.g., positioning hats as fashion statements).
- 4 Extend the buying season by pointing out the customer benefits associated with buying during the off-season (e.g., fewer crowds, easier parking, personalized services).
- 5 Alter the product mix throughout the year to include items likely to be in high demand during the current season.
- 6 Smooth peaks and valleys in demand by adding non-seasonal merchandise to the product mix.
- 7 Time activities not directly tied to sales to coincide with lull periods of demand (e.g., plant/equipment maintenance, training).
- 8 Accelerate the start of the buying season with “seasonal dating,” e.g., offer to ship items to retailers in May but not bill them until August.

6.12 Earth Day

First celebrated in the United States on April 22, 1970, to increase public awareness of environmental problems throughout the world, Earth Day is observed in dozens of countries today. Earth Day is an ideal time for companies to publicize their efforts and/or successes with regard to reducing or preventing pollution and conserving natural resources. Further, companies with strong environmental records often use Earth Day to heighten consumers’ sensitivity to environmental issues and to stir their local communities to action by sponsoring recycling drives, clean-up projects, waste reduction campaigns, and other “green” initiatives.

Don't discard "disposal"

Northwestern University's distinguished marketing professor Philip Kotler has pointed out a largely ignored gap in consumer behavior research. He suggests that consumer behavior consists largely of three broad stages: (1) acquisition, (2) consumption, and (3) disposal. Most consumer behavior research and marketing practice focus on the first and second categories, i.e., how consumers go about making purchase decisions and acquiring products, and how they use products after purchase.

A small number of studies examine disposal-related issues -- e.g., how consumers get rid of the goods they buy (toss into the trash, hoard, burn, recycle, give to charity, trade-in, or other?), whether consumers insist on disposal of the old prior to the purchase of a replacement, to what extent consumers consider eventual disposal prior to the initial purchase, whether buyers consider and care about the environmental effects of disposed items, and so on.

Understanding and facilitating the disposal process could prove to be beneficial for marketers -- especially those that serve environment-conscious consumers.

6.13 Charles M. Manson's birthday

Born in Cincinnati, Ohio on November 12, 1934, Manson led a commune in California in the 1960s. Known as the "Manson Family," members of the commune joined Manson in brutally killing at least six people in August 1969 -- including actress Sharon Tate who was eight and a half months pregnant at the time. Manson was sentenced to death (later reduced to life imprisonment) for his role in the gruesome murders. Not surprisingly, Manson and the murders drew considerable media attention across the United States. It seems that everyone knew of Charles Manson.

In an attempt to capitalize on Manson's bad-boy image, an ad agency in Philadelphia used Manson in a campaign to promote a particular youth-oriented clothing store. Commenting on the campaign in his 2005 book, *Often Wrong, Never in Doubt*, former ad agency head Donny Deutsch made it clear that the campaign had crossed the line, so to speak: "That's just insensitive and moronic. This is a mass murderer, a guy with a swastika on his head; there's no sane way in the world to celebrate him. I guess the concept was edginess, but that's way over the edge" (p. 152).

Campaign conscience questions

Is it legal? Is it ethical? Is it tasteful?

6.14 Small Business Saturday

American Express played a leadership role in 2010 when they coined the phrase "Small Business Saturday" (SBS) and launched the first campaign to encourage American holiday shoppers to patronize small and local businesses on the Saturday following Thanksgiving. To promote SBS, American Express used traditional advertising and public relations campaigns, as well as social media.

Since SBS began, the annual day to recognize small businesses has grown steadily in terms of revenues generated and the number of businesses and shoppers who participate. Thousands of businesses hold sales or other events to lure shoppers and promote SBS. In 2015, 95 million U.S. shoppers responded positively by handing over \$16.2 billion to small businesses on the unofficial holiday.

Resurgence of small business

"Americans are returning to Main Street for the things they need and ultimately that's a very healthy economic trend." -- Dan Danner, President and CEO of the National Federation of Independent Businesses

Further, 200 federal officials and agencies chimed in by posting proclamations of support for the occasion on social media or otherwise endorsing the day. Among them was President Obama who shopped at two small businesses on SBS with his two daughters. The growing popularity of SBS and the positive impact that consumer spending has on local economies, coupled with government and Presidential support, have led to considerable positive media coverage of SBS which helps to extend its upward trajectory of success.

Selected small business appeals (explicit or implicit)

- Support us – we’re the little guys, the underdogs. We need you.
- We employ your neighbors, keep money in the area to boost the local economy, and we care about the local community.
- Our product mix and practices are customized to fit the needs and tastes of the local community. We’re responsive, and we know your name too.

7. References

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