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Are the requirements of Business to Business Marketing Companies for graduates different?– an empirical study of the Market Research Industry.

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Abstract

The aim of this working paper is to explore the needs of our industry partners in terms of graduate requirements within the Business to Business marketing arena. It is based on an exploratory study within the market research industry and seeks to try to close the academic/industry gap by considering employer needs with a view to informing marketing education.

Keywords: Marketing education, Business to business marketing, market research practitioner

Introduction

The purpose of the study was twofold. Firstly, it explored the requirements of employers in the market research industry to highlight whether the graduates that we ‘produce’ meet their needs i.e. to close the gap between academia and industry. Secondly to investigate if B2B marketing companies have different needs from marketing employers generally.

This was a qualitative study which investigated the needs of market research companies in terms of the graduates that they employ. The context of the market research industry was chosen because of ease of access, contacts within this particular market sector and because the nature of their business is inherently B2B.

The aim of this working paper is to highlight what the market research industry wants from graduates in the conduct of business in the B2B arena. It begins with a review of the literature and proceeds with an outline of the methodology adopted and follows with a summary of the main findings. It finishes with limitations and suggestions for further research.

The Great divide

Many writers are agreed that a gap exists between academia and industry. There are several different avenues of enquiry – the relevance and accessibility to practitioners of academic research (Tapp 2004), business to business marketing research has not contributed significantly to management practice (Brennan and Turnbull 2001); the relevance of academic research in the business to business marketing context, where the perceived value of academic research is negative (Ankers and Brennan 2002); the debate about whether marketing academics deliver educational programmes that meet the needs of marketing managers (Brennan 2004), research regarding the relevance of marketing knowledge (Dacko 2006), and finally, the work of McCole (2004), who suggests that the gap is widened into a “chasm”, because of academia’s inability to understand how marketing is carried out in practice.

Further studies attempt suggestions to try and close the divide. For example, Hill et al (1998) suggest that there has been an attempt to bridge the theory and practice gap in relation to marketing planning and practice by using programmes of competency development, where work based learning may help to develop competencies in marketing planning.. In addition, Baker and Holt (2004) talk about They put forward that the failure of marketing education and implementation is the result of the failure of four key players – education academics consultants and practitioners - to transfer knowledge between the key players is critical to solving the problem.

Ardley (2006) suggests that in the workplace “issues of interpretation, culture, tacit knowledge, relationships and networks play a significant role” and as such should be addressed in the marketing curriculum. These issues are key in the B2B context.

So how can we as marketing educators provide marketing graduates adequately equipped for B2B marketing in the future and close the gap? Is it as Brennan (2004) suggests that it is about providing relevant knowledge and skills for career success or is it as Hill et al (1998) suggests and more in line with competencies?

Methodology

The Purpose of this research is to assess the key attributes that market research practitioners believe are important when recruiting recent graduates.

Research Objectives

To assess the significance of degree discipline is an important factor for companies

To ascertain which transferable skills are important and why

To explore the types of roles being undertaken by market research agencies

To investigate whether B2B marketing by market research companies requires different needs of graduates

Data Collection

A range of companies in the market research industry were selected - three large companies, one medium sized company, one smaller market research agency and a market research recruitment consultancy. Of the companies, two were London based, one in the Greater London area, one from the West country and one from the Midlands¹.

The data was collected using eleven semi-structured depth interviews with key personnel within market research companies. The interviews lasted between 1 and 2 hours and all interviews were recorded and transcribed. Access was obtained via screening by telephone and then visiting the offices of the companies to conduct the interviews. Key informants (e.g. Human Resource managers/directors and Head of Departments) were used as it was assumed that they would have critical knowledge and understanding of the key issues and understand the needs of other departments in the company where graduates would be employed.

Qualitative protocol was followed in that discussion guides were sent to respondents in advance to inform them about the nature of the questions. This helped to engage the respondents and establish the area for investigation. In a similar manner to Ardley (2006), rapport was built before the interviews took place where informal discussion about the nature and relevance of the research was discussed. As a result the respondents replied openly and were happy to discuss the issues even after the ‘official’ interview was over. The rapport building was further enhanced as the interviews took place at the employers place of work in their own environment.

A number of key research themes arose and are discussed in the next section using selected quotes to illustrate points arising.

Further sampling information about the interviewees and size of company can be supplied as necessary. Names and companies have been removed to protect confidentiality¹

Summary of Findings

Graduate recruitment policies

In the larger companies interviewed a graduate policy exists and is very well structured. In medium and smaller companies the policy tends to be less formal or even ad hoc.

Requirements of graduates

As one would expect the expectations and requirements of different departments in the company vary. For example, it varies not only between HR and the recruiting departments, between the departments themselves (i.e. Data Processing and Client servicing). In addition, the requirements vary at different stages of the selection process. The requirements also vary depending on the size of the company.

Knowledge v skills

Whilst marketing knowledge is seen as a positive requirement in selection, it is by no means the only selection requirement. In nearly all companies an “all round” perspective was looked for from ability to think to interpersonal skills and the ability to fit in. (see appendix a for a full list of skills mentioned).

Preference for university and type of degree

It would appear that on the face of it there is no bias towards a particular university. However, the reality of the situation when probed is somewhat different. In theory no bias exists in that HR has a ‘fair and equal’ selection process, where all students have an equal opportunity to participate. The larger companies would look for a student who has achieved at least a 2:1 and the university does not appear to matter. However, larger companies who have been recruiting graduates for many years and who have longitudinal data have found that there may be some bias because students from ‘traditional’ universities tend to perform better in the overall selection process and is borne out by the tests that are used and the benchmarks which are built up from experience over time.

The type of degree appeared to make no difference. Studying Business or marketing or marketing research or having a work placement helps and is a positive step, but it is not the deciding factor.

Discussion

Generally it was felt that universities are producing the right type of graduates for the market research industry taking account of the B2B nature of the business. However, students did not appear to understand the market research industry or what market research entails.

“There is a distinct lack of understanding. Graduates tend to think they are applying for a marketing position”. (Respondent D)

“Universities may want to consider raising the profile and understanding of how marketing, Market research and advertising all fit together. Students appear to have no real understanding of how they all work together” (Respondent B)

It was also felt that the Market research industry was failing to describe itself or sell itself adequately and therefore may not be attracting the right calibre of graduates. A problem echoed by other parts of the marketing industry.

“Part of the responsibility is for us to attract the right people...is market research sexy enough, well marketed enough as an industry and therefore if we do not, we get what we deserve”
(Respondent B)

Communication skills and the ability to think appear to be more important than knowledge.

“The ability to think and communicate and interpersonal skills is the key to helping people realise their potential” (Respondent D)

“The role of universities is less about teaching them something than the way of teaching...to encourage them to think which may on occasion put them on the spot...Their ability to think combined with communication would make a big difference to how they operate” (Respondent)

Having some marketing or business knowledge was seen as an advantage and if students had a baseline in skills than this was again a bonus.

“We expect to take good, bright graduates from scratch and train them in more or less everything. If they know a bit about it already fantastic but if not no matter because we teach them”.
(Respondent E)

“...the person we are looking for and the skills they can acquire not what they happen to know at this moment in time”(Respondent B)

As one would expect the requirements of graduates varies depending on the role that they are required to do and the size of the company. (A summary of the skills is listed in appendix A). In a business to business environment such as market research where relationships with client are critical the terms “consultant” and “partnering with clients” was mentioned by one respondent. “Potential to become research based consultants good at partnering with clients” (Respondent B)

They did mention an ability to work in a team and to be “presentable” with clients but did not mention developing relationships to any great extent. Interestingly only one of the respondents mentioned competencies, but they did mention work placement as a key attribute to graduate development in terms of understanding the industry and the B2B environment.

Within this study graduates had been criticised for trying to run before they could walk, but more recently they do not want to use their initiative. Not only did they not know how to go about a task they wanted to be told in detail, indicating an unwillingness to take a risk.

Along with the usual skills of communication, presentation skills, analytical and interpersonal skills, there was a notion of ‘the X factor’, what the author refers to as ‘nouse’! Is this the creativity or what Cunningham refers to as ‘imagination’ and can we teach this anyway? Is it something that is very personal to each recruiter and something we have to accept as part of life?

Limitations

Further quantitative data is now required to improve the generalisability of the results and further data is being collected from other sources to see if the findings are general in nature or specific to the market research industry and give insight into B2B companies in marketing.

Further research

The limitations of the study are that the views are based on 11 qualitative interviews within the market research industry. However, the data does give an insight into the needs of the industry. Interestingly, other employers who have been privy to the dissemination of the results largely agree with the findings.

Further data from a larger scale quantitative study could be collected and certainly these views are now being compared with the university's own employer research beyond the market research industry.

Appendix A

Writing skills

Attention to detail

Presentation skills

Interpersonal skills

Competencies

Planning and organising

Team work

Influencing people

Communication

Interpersonal skills

Abilities

think on their feet

sense of confidence

ability to focus on key points

Tests

Numeric

Verbal

Presentations

‘X’ factor

“mover and shaker”

Data Processing

attention to detail

meeting deadlines under pressure

communication skills

interpersonal skills

team work

Logic

being comfortable with figures

Client Services

People skills, build relationships

Analytical

“bright”

ability to contribute to the company

good presenter or the potential to be good

‘X’ factor

initiative

positive attitude

motivated

enthusiastic

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