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Teaching Customer Orientation to Millennials by Utilizing Electronic Communication between Students and Firms

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Abstract – This article describes an experiential method for teaching customer orientation by directing students to use their own experience with a business to write either an e-mail letter of praise or complaint to that business. Students complete a survey that asks them to rate businesses on customer orientation measures at the time they send the e-mail and, again, at the end of the semester after having had time to receive a response. Results of the surveys are analyzed and recommendations are given for conducting an interactive discussion that allows students to see the variability of the firms' commitment to customer orientation.

Keywords - Experiential learning, customer orientation, Millennial students, Principles of Marketing, e-mail.

Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and/or Practitioners – This article details a two-part project that marketing educators can use to teach students the concept of customer orientation by having them directly interact with a firm of their choice through electronic communication. In addition, guidelines to adapt this project to other contexts are provided. Practitioners will benefit from the findings of the article that suggest a high degree of importance should be placed on a satisfactory response to either customer praise or complaint.

Introduction

There is an undeniable need to find innovative ways to educate Millennial students in a way that increases their appreciation for the topic at hand. As noted by Munoz and Huser, (2008) the current generation of college students do not find a steady diet of lectures and memorization an engaging method of learning. Nevertheless, introductory marketing courses cover an enormous amount of material making lecturing a tempting approach to take in teaching the class. Not

only have we experienced a lack of student interest in this method, but we have also noted that it is difficult to convey the depth of meaning of various marketing terminologies with the traditional lecture and note taking style of education.

In order to combat the problems of traditional teaching methods, such as widespread student disinterest in daily lectures, business educators have used experiential learning exercises to give students an opportunity to increase their knowledge through engagement. As defined by Boud and Pascoe (1978) experiential learning must hand some control of the learning process over to the student, involve the student in that process, and relate it in a meaningful way to the world outside the classroom. This style of learning has been heralded as particularly relevant to Millennial students who crave a student-centered learning environment and social interactivity (Mastilak, 2012). Notably, active engagement in the education process has been demonstrated to promote learning among Millennials and has scored very well in student reviews of these exercises (e.g., Hickman, Mundell, Pearson, and Arnold, 2012; Munoz and Huser, 2008).

While experiential learning approaches have been studied by past researchers, this article is unique in that it describes a two-part, semester long activity that leverages the students' own experiences with firms for the purpose of bringing the concept of customer orientation to life. Specifically, we implemented a student e-mail letter writing activity that culminates with a lively end of the semester discussion that allowed us to demonstrate to students that not all businesses are equally customer-centric and that diligence in following through with a customer orientation creates an advantage for the firm.

The remainder of the article begins with a brief overview of the importance of experiential learning as it relates to the Millennial generation. Next, an explanation of the course objectives relevant to the article is offered, followed by a detailed description of the assignment we developed regarding customer orientation. Then, we discuss the results of the assignment and provide direction for generating classroom discussion based on the students' interaction with the firms which is a requirement of the assignment. Finally, we offer recommendations for successfully implementing the assignment and conclude with suggestions for how to modify the assignment for other courses.

Experiential Learning and the Millennial Generation

The importance of engaging Millennial students in the learning process cannot be underestimated. Numerous researchers have advised that this generation's preference for interaction with their peers and instructors renders daily lecturing an unlikely road to optimal student learning (e.g., Ashley, Kibbe, and Thornton, 2014; Sashittal, Jassawalla, and Markulis, 2012; Williams and Chinn, 2009). In her research on successfully teaching the Millennial generation, Wilson (2004) strongly advocates for an active learning environment that promotes classroom discussion and learning in a team setting. Conklin (2013) adds that Millennials

need to be actively involved in the educational experience and that assignments must be made relevant to their lives. In a comprehensive study that analyzed over 100,000 student evaluations of classroom instruction, Nargundkar and Shrikhande (2012) explain that classroom interaction and teamwork are increasingly important facets of educating Millennials. In addition, Conklin (2013) believes that by integrating a stronger focus on an interactive learning environment and incorporating the external world into the curriculum that we may be able to curb the narcissistic tendencies that other researchers have found to exist among Millennial business students (Westerman, Bergman, Bergman, and Daly, 2012).

Further, Beyers (2009) advises that Millennials are often operating at a more advanced level than the traditional "textbook" era that often times faculty readily revert to in introductory classes. Nevertheless, Brewer and Brewer (2010) point out that the initial knowledge stage of Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom, 1956) is essential for introductory courses. The knowledge stage of learning can easily be tied to a textbook approach to teaching due to the volume of terminology and concepts covered in these types of classes. Clearly, instructors cannot lose sight of the overall importance of learners gaining a wide breadth of knowledge in a Principles of Marketing course. Importantly, this class either lays the foundation for marketing majors or it is very likely the only marketing class for non-marketing majors. Therefore, we sought to create an assignment that teaches one of the fundamental building blocks of marketing - customer orientation - in a way that is meaningful to students. Our assignment leverages the Millennial generation's natural instincts to learn in an interactive environment while incorporating their own experiences. By facilitating an interactive learning environment that focuses on a core concept of the class, students should realize an increased likelihood of moving to the comprehension stage of Bloom's Taxonomy where they gain a deeper understanding of customer orientation by relating their learning to their own lives as has been suggested by Conklin (2013).

Course Objectives

A key objective of introductory marketing courses is typically to give students exposure to the importance of customer orientation. Deshpandé, Farley, and Webster (1993, p. 27) define customer orientation as "a set of beliefs that put the customer's interests first." A problem we have encountered using a simple lecture-format is teaching introductory marketing students the importance of a customer orientation and conveying the notion that firms are actually able to create a competitive advantage by being consumer-centric. We often find that introductory students believe it only "makes sense" for companies to take this approach and that they do not easily grasp the idea that what makes sense is not equally executed by all firms. This problem of a belief that a customer focus is "common sense" can be compounded because the majority of students in introductory marketing classes are business majors in another discipline. Therefore, creating

assignments and activities that allow students to facilitate their own learning can be particularly advantageous because of the uninterested student population that exists in introductory marketing classes due to its usual status as a core requirement for all business majors (Munoz and Huser, 2008).

Millennials have been called digital natives due to their lifelong history with electronic communication and technology (Baker, Lusk, and Neuhauser, 2012). Therefore, we created an exercise that incorporated their active on-line presence. Some evidence does exist demonstrating that business faculty have successfully incorporated e-mail exercises into their curriculum. For example, exercises have been developed that allow students the opportunity to complete in-basket tasks that instruct them to prioritize and respond to a list of hypothetical e-mails that a business manager could be faced with during the course of a day (Barclay and York, 1999; Greenberg and Rollag, 2005). Further, Proserpio and Gioia (2007) specifically call for creating learning opportunities that leverage Millennial students' familiarity with the on-line world. Our exercise combines the concept of customer orientation with electronic interaction with a firm so that we are able to allow students to develop their own informed opinions about a firm's commitment to the customer which is a strategy consistent with the recommendations of Fisher and Smith (2010). It also follows the recommendation of Conklin (2013, p. 519) who calls for, "greater integration of the student in the learning project so that it is more student and less instructor driven."

Method

Over the course of four semesters, 202 students enrolled in our introductory marketing classes participated in this assignment and received extra credit for their participation in both a pre-test and post-test phase. Our objective was to effectively communicate to students that all firms do not have equal success in achieving a strong customer orientation and that it is possible to gain a competitive advantage through successfully implementing a customer orientation. As a result, we developed a battery of five questions that were used to test students' perceptions of actions associated with a customer-centric organization. The questions, found in the Appendix, were administered to students in both the pre-test and post-test phase as described in the outline that follows:

1. During the first week of the semester, students enrolled in the introductory marketing class are required to initiate contact with a business through an e-mail assignment that instructs them to write a letter of either praise or complaint to the business of their choice. Students were allowed to self-select themselves into writing either an e-mail of praise or complaint directed to either a small or large business. Importantly, all students were instructed that the letter be genuine and rooted in their personal experience as a customer of their chosen business.

2. Also during the first week of the semester, students forward their e-mails to the instructor and complete a five question survey, hereafter referred to as the pre-test. The pre-test assesses the students' level of belief that companies care about their customers and the likelihood that firms will respond to e-mails of praise or complaint.
3. During the latter portion of the semester students are given the same survey, hereafter referred to as the post-test, as they were at pre-testing. In the post-test phase, students are given three additional questions that gauge their reaction to the response or lack of response to their e-mail.
4. During the last week of the semester, students are shown the results of their class's surveys as well as the cumulative results of all surveys collected over several semesters of this assignment. At that point, a discussion about how firms differ in their commitment to a customer orientation is initiated by the instructor. The purpose of this discussion is to allow students to hear from other students how various firms handle customer praise and complaint. Further, we are able to demonstrate through the discussion that all businesses do not respond and those that do respond do so in varying degrees of consistency with the concept of customer orientation.

Results, Analysis, and In-Class Discussion Opportunities

The results of the 202 students that participated in both the pre-test and post-test are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Pre-Test and Post-Test Results

<i>Question</i>	<i>Pre-Test</i>		<i>Post-Test</i>		<i>t-value</i>	<i>p-value</i>
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>		
1. Firms care about their customers ¹	3.89	.64	3.68	.86	3.58	.000
2. Small firms care about their customers ²	4.59	.54	4.32	.70	4.67	.000
3. Large firms care about their customers ³	3.41	.80	3.20	.86	3.71	.000
4. Firms will respond to praise ⁴	3.45	.97	3.52	.93	.78	.436
5. Firms will respond to complaint ⁵	3.71	.82	3.31	1.07	4.43	.000
6. Response less/more than expected ⁶	N/A	N/A	3.05	1.12	N/A	N/A
7. Satisfaction with response ⁷	N/A	N/A	2.84	1.33	N/A	N/A
8. Likely to buy again from firm ⁸	N/A	N/A	3.21	1.03	N/A	N/A

¹⁻⁵ Pre-test and Post-test measures

⁶⁻⁸ Post-test measures only

As shown, the students reported generally lower scores for firms at post-test as compared to pre-test. Specifically, post-test scores were lower ($M=3.68$, $SD=.86$) than at pre-test ($M=3.89$, $SD=.64$); $t(201)=3.58$, $p=.000$ for a belief that businesses care about customers. The trend of lower scores at post-test as compared to pre-test continued for both small businesses (Post-test: $M=4.32$, $SD=.70$), (Pre-test: $M=4.59$, $SD=.54$); $t(201)=4.67$, $p=.000$ and large businesses (Post-test: $M=3.20$, $SD=.86$), (Pre-test: $M=3.41$, $SD=.80$); $t(200)=3.71$, $p=.000$.

These preliminary findings provide an ideal starting point for classroom discussion since students can provide their own insight as to why ratings for all firms dropped over the course of the semester. Students can also be prompted to discuss the issue of general dissatisfaction with the response versus a complete lack of response by the firm. We have found it useful, even at this early stage of the discussion, to remind students that being consumer-centric is not adequately followed by many firms.

Our analysis further demonstrates that students began the semester with a bias in favor of small businesses that endured through the post-test phase. At pre-test, students believed that small businesses were more likely to care about customers ($M=4.59$, $SD=.54$) than large firms ($M=3.41$, $SD=.80$); $t(200)=20.93$, $p=.000$. At post-test the likelihood that small businesses cared about customers remained higher ($M=4.32$, $SD=.70$) than large firms ($M=3.20$, $SD=.86$); $t(201)=15.74$, $p=.000$. This finding provides a strong foundation for a rich discussion about students' perceptions of small and large businesses as they relate to the concept of customer orientation. We have used this finding to start a discussion to determine whether students believe that small firms have a more favorable bias than large firms in the court of public perception. Additionally, we use these responses to guide a conversation about what small firms can do to capitalize on a possible bias and what large firms can do to offset a negative bias.

Finally, preliminary analysis of the results demonstrated that students initially believed businesses were more likely to respond to letters of complaint ($M=3.71$, $SD=.82$) than to letters of praise ($M=3.45$, $SD=.97$); $t(201)=3.51$, $p=.001$. Conversely, at post-test students judged the likelihood of responding to letters of praise ($M=3.52$, $SD=.93$) higher than the likelihood of responding to letters of complaint ($M=3.31$, $SD=1.07$); $t(200)=2.48$, $p=.014$. These findings suggest that students who wrote letters of complaint were not satisfied with the responses. The discussion that ensues at this point initially revolves around student disappointment in the response or lack of response to e-mails of complaint. Nevertheless, students should be probed for particularly favorable responses to either letters of praise or complaint as this gets to the focus of the assignment. Specifically, this discussion provides numerous examples of the variability of a firm's commitment to and execution of customer orientation.

Table 2 provides a summary of the additional analysis that was performed based on the results of the post-test.

Table 2: Comparisons of Post-Test Results

<i>Response Received v. No Response Received</i>	<i>Yes Response</i>		<i>No Response</i>		<i>t-value</i>	<i>p-value</i>
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Response more/less than expected	3.59	1.08	2.52	.89	7.32	.000
Satisfaction with response	3.64	1.20	2.04	.92	10.17	.000
Likely to buy again from firm	3.79	.99	2.68	.75	8.84	.000
Firms care about their customers	3.90	.80	3.49	.88	3.46	.001
Small firms care about their customers	4.41	.65	4.24	.74	1.79	.076
Large firms care about their customers	3.41	.84	3.01	.83	3.34	.001
Firms will respond to praise	3.81	.73	3.28	1.01	4.18	.000
Firms will respond to complaint	3.91	.83	2.80	.97	8.62	.000
<i>Praise Letter v. Complaint Letter</i>	<i>Praise</i>		<i>Complaint</i>		<i>t-value</i>	<i>p-value</i>
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Response more/less than expected	3.31	1.06	2.67	1.13	3.80	.000
Satisfaction with response	3.25	1.27	2.19	1.19	5.59	.000
Likely to buy again from firm	3.59	.89	2.64	1.01	6.78	.000
Firms care about their customers	3.92	.68	3.33	.96	4.95	.000
Small firms care about their customers	4.41	.60	4.14	.82	2.65	.009
Large firms care about their customers	3.37	.76	2.92	.93	3.65	.000
Firms will respond to praise	3.71	.85	3.23	.99	3.59	.000
Firms will respond to complaint	3.32	1.06	3.36	1.05	.28	.782
<i>Large Firm Letters v. Small Firm Letters</i>	<i>Large Firm</i>		<i>Small Firm</i>		<i>t-value</i>	<i>p-value</i>
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Response more/less than expected	2.99	1.09	3.23	1.20	1.27	.205
Satisfaction with response	2.73	1.32	3.14	1.34	1.88	.062
Likely to buy again from firm	3.08	.98	3.61	1.10	3.22	.002
Firms care about their customers	3.65	.90	3.76	.75	.72	.476
Small firms care about their customers	4.33	.66	4.29	.84	.36	.723
Large firms care about their customers	3.19	.90	3.20	.74	.06	.955
Firms will respond to praise	3.44	.96	3.79	.80	2.32	.022
Firms will respond to complaint	3.28	1.08	3.39	1.04	.61	.544

First, students that received a response versus those that did not receive a response from their e-mail letters were analyzed for similarities and differences. Fulmer and Goodwin (1994) emphasize the importance of responding to customer mail which is supported by our results. As shown, a failure on the part of the firm to respond to e-mail was detrimental to the firm at post-test as seven of eight measures were significantly lower for students that did not get a response as compared to students that did receive a response from the firm. These results are particularly effective at demonstrating to students that firms demonstrate a higher commitment to customer orientation by simply responding to the e-mail. For instance, students that received a response reported more satisfaction with the response (Response: $M=3.64$, $SD=1.20$), (No response: $M=2.04$, $SD=.92$); $t(200)=10.17$, $p=.000$ and a higher likelihood to purchase from the firm in the future (Response: $M=3.79$, $SD=.99$), (No response: $M=2.68$, $SD=.75$); $t(200)=8.84$.

Second, students who wrote an e-mail letter of praise versus those students who wrote an e-mail letter of complaint were compared. Results in Table 2 demonstrate that students who wrote letters of complaint in our study were not “won over” which is consistent with the findings of Homburg and Fürst (2007) who report that a firm's response to a complaint is often unsuccessful and defensive. By showing students the results of the praise and complaint letter analysis we are able to convey to students that firms receiving complaints were generally unsuccessful as measured by the key outcomes studied at post-test. Specifically, the low rating of satisfaction with the response to a complaint letter ($M=2.19$, $SD=1.19$) was lower than the satisfaction with the response to the letter of praise ($M=3.25$, $SD=1.27$); $t(200)=5.59$, $p=.000$. Similarly, the likelihood to purchase from a firm that received a letter of complaint was lower than for firms receiving a letter of praise (Complaint: $M=2.64$, $SD=1.01$), (Praise: $M=3.59$, $SD=.89$); $t(200)=6.78$, $p=.000$. These results provide an opportunity to address the issue that firms receiving complaints are not satisfying their customers which can, in turn, segue into a conversation about the potential for firms to differentiate from the competition by finding ways to satisfy customers that are unhappy with the firm. At this stage, students are specifically probed for examples of unsuccessful responses to letters of complaint. Importantly, by this time in the discussion, students have already heard some examples of successful responses to both letters of praise and complaint. Now, we ask students to suggest ways to improve the examples given of unsuccessful responses to letters of complaint. This has often included a modification of some of the successful responses that students have previously discussed. Additionally, students are challenged to develop new ideas for dealing with customer complaints. We have found challenging the class in this way is very beneficial for developing more varied solutions to achieving the aim of increased customer orientation.

Third, an analysis was conducted of the e-mail letters written to small firms as compared to those sent to large firms. Notably, most of the post-test results were not statistically different. Nevertheless, in our results, students were more likely to purchase again from small firms ($M=3.61$, $SD=1.10$) as compared to large firms ($M=3.08$, $SD=.98$); $t(200)=3.22$, $p=.002$. Additionally, students were marginally more satisfied with the responses of small firms ($M=3.14$, $SD=1.34$) as compared to large firms ($M=2.73$, $SD=1.32$); $t(200)=1.88$, $p=.062$. The discussion of this analysis can lead back to the students' perceived differences between large and small firms as it pertains to a customer focus. Interestingly, the mean scores for neither small firms nor large firms is particularly high. This leads to a natural discussion of the general shortcomings of the responses and specific recommendations for ways to increase the quality of responses in order to become more congruent with the concept of customer orientation.

Table 3 summarizes the changes in pre-test and post-test evaluations of firms in each of the categories studied (Yes/No Response, Praise/Complaint, Small/Large firm). For example, 92 students ultimately did not receive a response to their e-mail. These 92 students' pre-test scores were compared to their post-test scores. Each of the six sets of before and after results allows for creative discussion about their outcome as well as how they relate to customer orientation. For instance, the results here further demonstrate the ramifications associated with a failure to respond to customers as evidenced by the lowering in the ratings of the belief that firms care about their customers when they fail to simply respond to an e-mail (Pre-test: $M=3.87$, $SD=.65$), (Post-test: $M=3.49$, $SD=.88$); $t(91)=4.36$, $p=.000$. Interestingly, the 110 students who did receive responses did not reward these companies with increased ratings at post-test. Specifically, students did not report that receiving a response led to an increased belief that firms cared about their customers (Pre-test: $M=3.91$, $SD=.62$), (Post-test: $M=3.90$, $SD=.80$); $t(109)=.15$, $p=.882$. In addition, a belief that large firms cared about their customers did not translate to a positive change in that metric for students that received a response (Pre-test: $M=3.47$, $SD=.88$), (Post-test: $M=3.41$, $SD=.84$); $t(109)=.71$, $p=.478$. Surprisingly, a belief that small firms care about their customers decreased among those students that received a response to their letter (Pre-test: $M=4.64$, $SD=.50$), (Post-test: $M=4.41$, $SD=.65$); $t(109)=2.95$, $p=.004$. Therefore, students can be probed for why firms that did respond generally were not rewarded with higher scores at post-test. Additionally, students can be asked why the average rating fell for small firms at post-test as compared to pre-test.

At this stage of the discussion, we have found that it is important to select information and results from Table 3 that will add to the overall classroom experience. Depending on the discussion to this point, it may be possible to again ask students for ways in which firms could increase their commitment to customer orientation through more successful responses to the letters. Alternatively, we have found it valuable to wrap up the discussion by shifting the attention from the letters to how these firms can create a sustainable competitive advantage through an on-going dedication to customer orientation.

Table 3: Pre-Test and Post-Test Results

<i>No Response Only (N=92)</i>	<i>Pre-Test</i>		<i>Post-Test</i>		<i>t-value</i>	<i>p-value</i>
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Firms care about their customers	3.87	.65	3.49	.88	4.36	.000
Small firms care about their customers	4.55	.57	4.24	.74	3.62	.000
Large firms care about their customers	3.37	.73	3.01	.83	4.16	.000
Firms will respond to praise	3.26	.94	3.28	1.01	.13	.895
Firms will respond to complaint	3.54	.86	2.80	.97	5.70	.000
<i>Yes Response Only (N=110)</i>	<i>Pre-Test</i>		<i>Post-Test</i>		<i>t-value</i>	<i>p-value</i>
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Firms care about their customers	3.91	.62	3.90	.80	.15	.882
Small firms care about their customers	4.64	.50	4.41	.65	2.95	.004
Large firms care about their customers	3.47	.88	3.41	.84	.71	.478
Firms will respond to praise	3.67	.97	3.81	.73	1.09	.279
Firms will respond to complaint	3.90	.73	3.91	.83	.10	.921
<i>Praise Letters Only (N=127)</i>	<i>Pre-Test</i>		<i>Post-Test</i>		<i>t-value</i>	<i>p-value</i>
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Firms care about their customers	3.99	.67	3.89	.76	1.59	.115
Small firms care about their customers	4.57	.66	4.38	.72	2.88	.005
Large firms care about their customers	3.46	.84	3.34	.82	1.64	.104
Firms will respond to praise	3.34	.97	3.64	.97	2.61	.010
Firms will respond to complaint	3.77	.85	3.30	1.10	4.39	.000
<i>Complaint Letters Only (N=75)</i>	<i>Pre-Test</i>		<i>Post-Test</i>		<i>t-value</i>	<i>p-value</i>
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Firms care about their customers	3.65	.76	3.31	1.02	3.16	.002
Small firms care about their customers	4.52	.78	4.09	.95	3.90	.000
Large firms care about their customers	3.20	.99	2.89	.98	2.66	.010
Firms will respond to praise	3.53	1.11	3.21	1.03	2.00	.049
Firms will respond to complaint	3.48	.94	3.33	1.11	.93	.358

<i>Large Firm Letters Only (N=153)</i>	<i>Pre-Test</i>		<i>Post-Test</i>		<i>t-value</i>	<i>p-value</i>
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Firms care about their customers	3.92	.69	3.65	.90	3.81	.000
Small firms care about their customers	4.61	.54	4.33	.66	4.59	.000
Large firms care about their customers	3.46	.82	3.20	.90	3.81	.000
Firms will respond to praise	3.48	.98	3.44	.96	.43	.667
Firms will respond to complaint	3.67	.87	3.28	1.08	3.69	.000
<i>Small Firm Letters Only (N=49)</i>	<i>Large Firm</i>		<i>Small Firm</i>		<i>t-value</i>	<i>p-value</i>
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Firms care about their customers	3.82	.44	3.76	.75	.52	.607
Small firms care about their customers	4.51	.55	4.29	.84	1.60	.117
Large firms care about their customers	3.27	.74	3.19	.73	.73	.471
Firms will respond to praise	3.33	.95	3.79	.80	2.22	.031
Firms will respond to complaint	3.83	.66	3.39	1.04	2.46	.017

Other unique learning opportunities also present themselves to the instructor when going over the results with students. For instance, the dissatisfaction that students show in the firms' collective responses to letters of complaint can drive an interesting discussion on the importance of service recovery. Instructors can solicit student stories of times when they initially received poor service but were satisfied by the firm's ability to recover from the service failure. Instructors can then cite researched evidence that firms do benefit from service recovery initiatives (e.g., Beverland, Kates, Lindgreen, and Chung, 2010). In this way, the discussion can serve as a way to bridge students' everyday experiences, the content of this assignment, and vitally important business practices related to a strong customer orientation.

Recommendations for Implementation of the Assignment

We have found using data compiled from their own class's assignment is essential in eliciting strong student participation during the course of the discussion. As a result, this assignment has greatly assisted us in demonstrating that understanding the importance of customer orientation is much different than a firm successfully executing a meaningful customer focus.

While we have not experienced any difficulty with fictitious or inappropriate e-mail letters of praise or complaint it should be noted that we are very careful to emphasize that we read the e-mails that they forward to us and that they are a source of future discussion. Therefore, we recommend that instructors place

emphasis on the authenticity of the letters in order to facilitate the best possible learning environment. A related concern is that students should not include in the letter that this is a class assignment. Stating that the letter is class-related would potentially skew the response rate from firms and could lessen the level of disparity in the quality of responses that students receive from the firms. A final issue to consider is the potential need to obtain clearance from the university research review board.

Adaptability to Other Classes

This assignment can be modified to fit the needs of the course and ability level of the students. For instance, instructors could modify this assignment and compare their results against ours by using more experienced marketing students. Advanced students could write letters seeking to elicit particular responses from the businesses and their subsequent reaction to the responses received could then be analyzed. We suspect that advanced students would be even more discerning in the evaluation of the responses which would allow for this assignment to be modified to reach more advanced levels of Bloom's Taxonomy.

Additionally, we have used this e-mail writing exercise in Introduction to Business classes with added emphasis on the importance of e-mail writing etiquette which has become a lost art within the electronic communication age (Kelley, 2010). Regardless of the modifications made to the assignment, if any, we believe that the semester long approach with a pre and post measure taken provides interesting opportunities to not only analyze the changes in student perception but also to discuss those changes in an interactive learning environment.

Appendix

Pre-Test and Post-Test Questions

1. I think business firms really do care about their customers. 1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree
2. I think small business firms really do care about their customer. 1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree
3. I think large business firms really do care about their customers. 1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree
4. I think business firms will respond to a complaint e-mail. 1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree
5. I think business firms will respond to a praise e-mail. 1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree

Additional Post-Test Questions

6. The response I received from the business firm was much less/much more than I expected. 1 = Much Less; 5 = Much More
7. The response I received from the business firm was satisfactory. 1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree
8. I am likely to purchase products or services from this business firm in the future. 1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree

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