

2023

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Recommended Citation

Richardson, Pam and Perren, Rebeca (2023) "Implementing a Short-term Field-based Experiential Learning Activity: The Retail Scavenger Hunt," *Atlantic Marketing Journal*: Vol. 12: No. 2, Article 9. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/amj/vol12/iss2/9>

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Implementing a Short-term Field-based Experiential Learning Activity: The Retail Scavenger Hunt

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Abstract – This article introduces the Retail Scavenger Hunt (RSH)—a short-term field-based experiential learning activity. This flexible pedagogical tool enables students to experience first-hand what is commonly referred to in the consumer-packaged goods industry as “the store check.” Although initially designed as an instructor-led activity, the authors adapted the exercise during the pandemic to be executed as a self-directed, app-based field activity. As a result, this research can compare student impressions across implementation modes.

Keywords – Retail; Scavenger hunt; Active-learning; Experiential learning; Pedagogy

Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers, and/or Practitioners – These results underscore the importance of accessible and easy-to-implement experiential pedagogical exercises. The authors discuss how the activity can be adapted as an instructor-led or self-directed, app-based activity for situations requiring social distancing (e.g., national pandemic) or scalability (i.e., large classes). Finally, this article provides a roadmap for marketing educators who wish to use this activity in their course(s).

Introduction

At consumer-packaged-goods (CPG) companies, such as Unilever and Kimberly-Clark, the marketing department serves as the “hub-of-the-wheel.” (Imagine a diagram of a wheel with many spokes, with Brand Management centrally located on the wheel and other business functions surrounding it). The marketing department is responsible for developing, implementing, and analyzing all strategies and initiatives for brands. As part of the onboarding process for new employees, CPG companies introduce their portfolio of brands and teach new employees about their departmental roles and responsibilities. They also encourage employees to develop a *marketing lens*, regardless of the department they will be working in. To do so, brand managers instruct employees to visit local retail stores where the company’s products are sold. This visit is referred to as a *store check*. During these visits, new employees gain a better understanding of the placement of products on the shelf and the advertising inside the retail store, realizing that these are targeted strategic initiatives.

Store checks not only provide an opportunity for employees to observe their company’s brand portfolio inside a retail store, but they also allow them to observe competitive marketing initiatives and those of the retailer. Keen observation answers crucial questions such as: “How does the placement of my brand compare to that of my competitors? What products are displayed on endcaps? Which brands utilize shelf talkers, floor graphics, or digital screens for advertising? Are any of my products currently out of stock?” These insights are essential for understanding the challenges and opportunities facing a brand. Accordingly, new hires scour retail locations to identify and observe differences in product shelving, promotional offerings, and retail marketing support. These evaluations provide valuable insights into marketing best

practices, retailers' strategic initiatives, and improving consumer relationships. Store checks are not a one-time event or limited to the onboarding process; they are a continual practice crucial for all employees to stay informed about marketing strategies and potential competitive threats. As Inhofe Rapert & Mukherjee (2020) noted, "the store (check) has long been a means of connecting with consumers and exploring the complexities of retail, witnessing marketing plans come to life on the shelf" (p. 92). With its significant impact on marketing knowledge and strategic understanding, how can business students gain this hands-on—on-the-job—experience in a structured learning environment? This research provides a versatile solution to this question.

Marketing educators understand the importance of "imparting foundational knowledge while also helping students acquire learning through *experiences*" (Cowley, 2020, p. 125). When students learn "by doing," experiential learning occurs. As pressure mounts for educators to boost students' preparation for the business world, experiential learning activities have proven valuable to support these efforts (Labrecque, Markos, & Darmody, 2021). However, despite widespread recognition of the value of experiential learning, limited attention has been given to incorporating short-term, field-based activities in marketing education literature until recently (Schaller, 2020). To address this gap, we conducted a "Retail Scavenger Hunt (RSH)" that allows students to gain hands-on experience through a field-based guided exercise that resembles a store check.

The RSH not only provides an experiential learning opportunity, but also supports the development of a "work-ready graduate" (Ewing and Ewing, 2017). The authors argue that since business students are provided roadmaps to excel in the classroom, with syllabi outlining expectations and extra credit offered, they may face difficulties in corporate positions. However, field-based learning such as the RSH can refine behaviors, thoughts, and abilities needed as a working professional. Practicing in the classroom allows students to perform more effectively and efficiently in future corporate environments, thus developing transferable skills from academic to corporate settings.

The need for accessible—*short-term*—field-based experiences that can be easily replicated continues to grow as business schools seek to integrate more realism into their curriculum (Franco Valdez & Cervantes, 2018; Schaller, 2020). Many obstacles can prevent educators' adoption of long-term field-based experiences—logistical challenges, time constraints, costs, curricular needs, administrative barriers, etc. Moreover, the recent global pandemic forced educators to quickly pivot and adapt how experiential learning can be delivered to students. "While there is no precedent or pedagogical foundation for developing experiential activities during a pandemic, it has allowed educators to rethink such experiences in a way that is robust to the situation fostered by the pandemic" (Lashley & McCleery, 2020, p. 12614). This research examines the flexibility of the RSH activity to be adapted either as an instructor-led or as a self-directed, app-based activity. An app-based activity offers advantages such as flexibility, accessibility, personalized feedback, and scalability (i.e., large classes). Students can work at their own pace and location, allowing for implementation in courses delivered in various modalities.

Accordingly, we structure the remainder of this article as follows. First, we review the extant literature on experiential and field-based learning. Next, we outline the RSH exercise details, providing a roadmap for instructors to conduct the activity with their students. We discuss how the RSH can be adapted as an instructor-led or a self-guided experience. Then, the findings from our study examining the outcomes of the two execution modes will follow.

Finally, we discuss the implications of this class activity, the limitations of our work, and ideas for marketing educators who wish to implement this type of activity in their courses.

Literature Review

Experiential Learning

Experiential learning enables students to apply their classroom knowledge to real-world situations. Kolb (1984) defines it as “knowledge created through the transformation of an experience.” This teaching method has been found to be effective due to its realism (Doyle, Helms, & Westrup, 2004; Franco Valdez & Cervantes, 2018; Schaller, 2020) and has been shown to result in richer classroom discussions, better attendance rates (Weible & McClure, 2011), and increased information retention (Manzon, 2020). Experiential learning has been incorporated in various forms, such as study abroad programs (Wright & Larsen, 2012), job shadowing (Mullen & Larsen, 2016), internships (Hoyle & Goffnett, 2013), role-playing (Thomas, Magnotta, Chang, & Steffes, 2018; Kemp, McDougal, & Syrdal, 2019), simulated business enterprises (Russell-Bennett, Rundle-Thiele, & Kuhn, 2010), and online marketing tools (Canhoto & Murphy, 2016; Cowley, 2020). Ewing and Ewing (2017) argue for incorporating experiential learning throughout the curriculum to produce “work-ready” graduates.

For those students preparing for a career in marketing, experiential learning activities serve as essential practice sessions where marketing concepts can be identified and thoroughly discussed (Manzon, 2020). Further, experiential learning is becoming “increasingly more prevalent in accreditation standards,” as indicated in a 2018 standard update whereby “schools must ‘provide a portfolio of experiential learning opportunities for business students, through either formal coursework or extracurricular activities, which allow them to engage with faculty and active business leaders’ and ensure these activities provide exposure to business and management in both local and diverse global contexts” (Levy, 2018). Unlike traditional methods of learning through lectures, case analyses, and online simulations, experiential learning enhances overall student engagement, enables them to reflect on classroom teachings, and exposes them to a more rewarding and more involved personal experience with marketing material and concepts (Kemp, McDougal, & Syrdal 2019).

The Retail Scavenger Hunt: Short-term, Field-based Learning

Field-based learning is experiential learning, which occurs outside of the classroom, giving students an up-close-and-personal experience that can clarify abstract concepts (Schaller, 2020). For instance, Burgess (2012) describes a class project where students design, produce, operate, and analyze the outcomes of a pop-up retail consignment store on campus. More recently, Inhofe Rapert & Mukherjee (2020) introduced a learning activity as a ‘retail safari,’ which was part of a semester-long project with a capstone class. The activity itself spanned three days “involving 17 Walmart executives and two Walmart retail locations” (Rapert and Mukherjee, 2020, p.92). This retail safari highlighted the intricate, and often complex, relationship among the band of suppliers that work together to get products on the shelf. The narratives of the Walmart executives brought obscure words from the textbook to life in the store. The retail safari was also sponsored by the Network of Executive Women, an organization that advocates for the advancement of all women in business (Rapert & Mukherjee, 2020).

Depending upon the execution, field-based learning activities may be classified as long-term or short-term. Because long-term, field-based activities require significant time and resources, short-term, field-based activities may be more optimal for instructors to develop and implement. Yet, these types of activities are harder to find in marketing literature. One example of a short-term, field-based activity is a scavenger hunt. Implemented in areas of nursing (Tinnon, 2014), library systems (Rugan & Nero, 2013), study abroad programs (Kendall, Kendall, & Hsu, 2020), museum visits (Doyle, Helms, & Westrup, 2004), and communication (Pirker, Weiner, Garcia-Barrios, & Gütl, 2014), scavenger hunts are an effective tool for enhanced engagement (Schaller, 2020). This may be especially true if the experiential activity is designed with a structure in which students actively connect their observations to the course content (Hamer, 2000). The RSH activity in this article, which we describe next, was carefully crafted to incorporate the experiential learning process to ensure that students connect the concepts learned in the classroom to real-world examples they observe in a retail setting.

The Retail Scavenger Hunt activity

Scavenger hunts have long been a popular form of recreation due to their ability to foster excitement and elicit a sense of adventure. A scavenger hunt is a structured competition or game requiring participants to locate a list of items, overcome obstacles, or solve puzzles (“Scavenger Hunt,” 2023). The goal is to accomplish these tasks in the most expeditious manner possible. While traditionally used as a leisure activity, scavenger hunts have increasingly been adopted for educational purposes, teaching problem-solving skills, promoting teamwork, and facilitating the exploration of new environments. Integrating scavenger hunts into the educational setting is not a novel concept, with prior literature suggesting the potential benefits of incorporating such games into the classroom.

The RSH was created as a short-term field-based experiential activity where students could apply course material in a real-life retail context. It is a semi-structured¹ activity in which students are provided only a small percentage of information about the topic and actively participate in the learning process through assigned tasks (Hamer, 2000). It was initially designed as an instructor-led activity. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the design of the activity was modified to accommodate social distancing. As a result, the authors adapted the exercise to be executed as a self-directed, app-based field activity. The additional benefit of this delivery method enabled the exercise to be scalable for larger classes beyond accommodating social distancing. Each execution included a list of clues related to in-store marketing and retail strategies discussed in class and presented in the textbook. These clues relate to the learning objectives used to understand and identify the marketing strategies (at retail) that students are instructed to observe (Schaller, 2020). The RSH is graded based on individual participation. However, it can also be graded as a bonus assignment or graded assignment. To be graded as a bonus assignment, the RSH is optional completion; students can elect to participate or complete an alternate assignment to earn additional points to count towards their final grade. For the alternate assignment, students were to read an academic manuscript on experiential learning and complete a questionnaire (about the manuscript).

¹ In the self-directed execution students did not work in small groups. However, we still believe that the structure provided is more in line with what Hamer describes as a semi-structured activity than a loosely structured activity, as students did not need to deeply process course material or had a great deal of control over the activity or process.

For this research, the RSH was implemented in eight sections of Principles of Marketing and Retailing courses during the Fall 2020 and Spring 2021 semesters in two universities across the US (see Table 1), with students who are primarily business majors. (There were no students who completed the RSH twice.) The activity was designed to complement course objectives (Schaller, 2020), which are to (1) understand the fundamental concepts and practices in marketing; (2) become knowledgeable about the structure of marketing; (3) demonstrate familiarity with the complex environment affecting marketing decisions; (4) explain and analyze merchandise mix, pricing, and assortment concepts and strategies, and (5) identify the role of promotional efforts in communicating with retail internal and external publics.

Setting up the Stage

To effectively set the stage for this activity, it is critical to link the course material to the activity to guide the students through the observation process. The introduction of the RSH to students enrolled in the Principles of Marketing course differed from the introduction for students in the Retailing course. The Principles of Marketing course is a required course for all business majors. Typically, when students enroll in this course, it is the first time that they are exposed to marketing concepts and topics. To ensure preparation for the RSH, the instructor shares in-market products (via Zoom or in-person) to illustrate terms and concepts discussed in class (which are presented in a “show-and-tell” fashion). For example, a Walmart Equate product is shown when discussing the term “private label”; Dreyer’s Thin Mint ice cream is shown when talking about “co-brand” partnerships, and McDonald’s print ads from *Essence* and *Seventeen* magazines are shown when discussing “(multicultural) branding strategy or target consumer.” Seeing real-world examples helps the students bring the marketing terms and concepts presented in the classroom to life and gives them insights on how to conduct their search during the RSH exercise.

The Retailing course is an elective that non-business students may take; however, they must have taken the introductory Principles of Marketing course. Hence, these students are more familiar with marketing-related concepts. Because the Retailing course textbook provides an excellent foundation on retailing, it was how the “clues” for the RSH were introduced. For instance, the textbook provides a thorough overview of retail concepts such as product placement (at retail), retailer promotional programs, strategic design, developmental and executional initiatives (for retailers), and store design layouts. To ensure a proper grasp of the classroom and textbook material, the instructor executed the RSH, for this research, *after* presenting and discussing several retailing chapters. Next, we discuss the differences between the two execution modes.

Instructor-led Implementation

For the in-person execution of the RSH, the instructor visits a local grocery store two weeks prior to the scheduled activity date. During the visit, the instructor notes various marketing strategies and executional initiatives previously discussed in class and the textbook. This visit takes about 45 minutes, and the instructor obtains permission to conduct the field activity from the store manager. Based on the instructor’s notes, clues are designed so that the students will need to walk around a large portion of the grocery store (the instructor can select a subset of the questions provided in Appendix B, ensuring there is a good representation from the various elements of the retailing mix). During the “hunt,” the students respond to the clues by observing executional differences among products and categories.

Students were informed of the activity one month before the scheduled activity date. Transportation to the grocery store was arranged in advance and coordinated with pre-arranged student groups. Upon arrival, class attendance was taken, students were provided with a printout of the RSH clues, and the instructions for the scavenger hunt were verbally provided. The instructor remained onsite for any needed assistance. Students walked around the grocery store individually (or in small groups to adhere to social distancing requirements) and wrote down their responses to the clues individually. Once the activity was completed, the instructor held a debrief session. Afterward, the students checked out with the instructor.

Self-directed Implementation

The integration of mobile applications in academia is widespread and has been shown to enhance student engagement (Pechenkina et al., 2017). Implementing a classroom exercise as a self-directed activity with an app offers several advantages, including flexibility, accessibility, personalized feedback, scalability, and cost-effectiveness. Students can complete the exercise at any time and from any location. This functionality is critical for instructors teaching in multiple modalities or large classes for which coordinating a synchronous trip to a store is logistically impossible or unfeasible. The app provides personalized feedback and guidance, and can be used by many students simultaneously, making it a scalable solution. Developing and implementing an app-based exercise is more cost-effective than in-person exercises with physical resources and instructors. It can be offered to other sections, and the know-how can be shared within the department to create uniform experiences across the curriculum. By incorporating gamified elements into these apps, researchers have observed an even deeper level of student engagement and motivation, leading to improved retention and higher course grades (Pechenkina et al., 2017).

For the self-directed implementation, students were given a two-week window to complete the activity at their own pace. The task was facilitated through an interactive experience platform called Goosechase, a scavenger hunt app. The app allows the instructor to set up a collection of “missions” to complete for points. The missions can appear and disappear throughout the scavenger hunt experience, and the organizer can create combinations of tasks with photo/video, text, and GPS options (Goosechase, 2023). Accordingly, the instructor uploaded a series of questions via the app’s web interface to set up the missions the students would complete when they arrived at the store of their choice (no missions were set up to disappear). Students downloaded the app and completed the missions on their smartphones by answering questions and submitting photos, videos, and text answers as evidence (see Figure 1).

Missions had different point values depending on the level of difficulty. Students were not required to complete all available missions as a large pool was necessary to accommodate the variety of store settings that students may choose (see Appendix B for the complete list of questions). The app interface also allowed the instructor to provide additional links or photos to explain clues when additional clarification was needed (e.g., complex concepts that may need additional explanation). The instructions warned students to complete missions correctly as incorrect submissions would be sent back (however, no missions were sent back).

The app interface enabled the instructor to award bonus points to missions accomplished in an extraordinary fashion. It also included additional gamification tools, such as a leaderboard and an optional feature to enable social buttons to have students interact as

they engage in the hunt. Although available in Goosechase, the authors did not elect to use the leaderboard or badge features. The RSH was not introduced as a competition among students but rather as an opportunity to gain supplementary knowledge. If interested, students could enable social buttons that interacted with others engaged in the RSH. It is worth mentioning that the authors carried out the RSH as an individual exercise, but the app can facilitate team creation and collaboration in completing missions.

The Debrief

After each RSH activity, instructors conducted a debriefing session to gather students' initial feedback on the RSH, address any difficulties they faced, and highlight common retailing strategies. Students expressed enjoyment of the activity, appreciation for getting out of the classroom, and a better understanding of their textbook learnings. During the debriefing session, students discussed their challenges during the scavenger hunt, such as finding products with hashtags and social media logos on packaging or examples of the "pink tax." In the self-directed implementation, the debriefing session occurred after the completion window closed. With the flexibility to choose from a menu of 80+ missions in the app, most 'clues' received between 50-75 submissions. Missions with fewer submissions included finding a product endorsed by a non-profit and a product with two facings. One advantage of the app was capturing images and videos that could be used in the debrief. The interface categorizes the submissions by users or missions, allowing the instructor to retrieve examples to bring to the class discussion quickly. Because students visited different stores, the self-directed implementation also provided a wider assortment of comparisons and examples for a richer class discussion.

An essential element of the debrief session is discussing some of the observed retail strategies. For instance, the instructor also demonstrated how retailers mirror national-brand product strategies by showing the similarities of different products within the same category. For instance, the bottle shape of the retailer's private label (PL) brand of fabric softener was of similar imagery to Downy, a leading national fabric softener brand. In addition, the label on the PL fabric softener and its color scheme highly resembled Downy. The instructor would then connect these observations to knowledge acquired in the course. Retailers know that national brands drive consumer traffic to stores (Kitrell, 2015). However, they also know that 76% of consumer purchasing decisions are made in-store (Anthony, 2016). Therefore, when presented with two similar product options, retailers assume the price will be a critical factor in consumers' purchasing decisions. Hence, the primary reason for mirroring national-brand strategies is the appearance (and shelf placement), but at substantially lower costs. This example illustrates how course concepts come to life for students during this activity.

Grading the RSH

The RSH offers ample flexibility in assessment options to accommodate various course structures and institutional settings. Grading can be based on the accuracy of responses to the clues, overall participation, reflection on the activity, or bonus points for the number of clues found or creative responses. The RSH can be either mandatory or optional, and instructors could choose to structure it for students to participate individually or in teams. This allows instructors to choose the approach that aligns with their pedagogical goals and course objectives. The authors administered the RSH as a mandatory assignment for some courses and a bonus assignment for others; all students were evaluated individually. When offered as

extra credit, the students had other alternatives of equal value that they could choose to complete instead of the RSH; however, only one student chose the alternative.

In courses where the RSH was a mandatory assignment, students received 25 points (2.5% of their final course grade) for attending, participating, and providing responses to the set of clues (on a hard-copy document); the accuracy of responses was not graded. In courses where the RSH was an optional opportunity for extra credit, students could earn up to 2% of their final course grade for participating and accurately completing the clues through the Goosechase app. The instructor then reviewed the submissions and awarded points based on the photos, texts, or videos submitted as evidence for each mission completed. On average, students completed more missions than was necessary to earn full points. These grading approaches can easily be adapted for group grading if desired, as both the app-based and instructor-led implementations lend themselves to group-based grading. In both modalities, partial credit was given for partial completion of the clues.

There were no ethical concerns with the data collection of the RSH activity. Both authors' institutions do not require IRB approval for data collection when done as a class assignment and both allowed for participation and bonus marks. The authors employed a grading strategy that offered multiple options to reduce bias in student responses. These included automatic point assignments for RSH participation, optional RSH participation as a bonus opportunity (i.e., an alternate assignment was available if students chose not participate in the RSH), or a rubric-based grading system for correctly answered clues with varying point values. Students who attended, participated, and completed the RSH clues easily attained participation marks. Completing the RSH was optional for the bonus opportunity, and participation was consistent with other extra credit activities in previous semesters.

Assessing the Effectiveness and Adaptability of the Retail Scavenger Hunt

To assess the effectiveness of the RSH activity, we conducted the exercise both as an instructor-led and a self-directed activity at two universities across the United States during the Fall 2020 and Spring 2021 semesters (see Table 1 for a breakdown of sections). To evaluate the impact of the exercise, students were asked to complete a survey about their experience upon completion of the RSH (student demographics are provided in Table 2). Participation in the survey was voluntary.

[Insert Tables 1 & 2 about here]

The survey questions were carefully constructed to gauge the student's overall impression of the activity, which was geared to connect classroom concepts and real-world application. Drawing from prior research (Inhofe Rapert & Mukherjee, 2020), pedagogical affect was measured using Mitchell and Olsen's (1981) seven-point semantic differential scale, which other researchers successfully used. These measures address methods of instruction in terms of effectiveness, usefulness, satisfaction, added value, and whether the instruction and experience was good or bad. We asked students on a seven-point scale whether they would recommend the activity to another student (see Table 3). The survey also asked students to reflect on their experience by asking a series of open-ended questions that probed into what students liked about the activity—what they found interesting and surprising. The questions asked students to discuss what they learned about a retail environment and whether participating in this activity helped them (to better) understand marketing concepts. The

questions also inquired about which clues (if any) were difficult to find and asked students to provide feedback on future improvements to the activity.

[Insert Table 3 about here]

Across the two execution modes, students rated the activity very highly for all six measures of pedagogical affect, with means ranging from 6.11 to 6.53 on a seven-point scale (Cronbach's alpha = 0.76). We used *t*-tests to discern significant differences between the evaluation of RSH that was instructor-led ($n = 82$) and self-directed ($n = 85$). When testing for differences between the execution modes, there were no significant differences when comparing the composite scores of pedagogical affect ($t = -1.592$; $df = 148.155$; $p = 0.113$). A closer examination of the individual scale items reveals a significant difference only for one item assessing whether the instructions were good (see Table 3). Surprisingly, students in the self-directed execution rated the RSH instructions better than those in the instructor-led execution ($M_{\text{instructor-led}} = 6.02$, $M_{\text{self-directed}} = 6.51$; $t = -2.46$; $p < .05$). Finally, an impressive 94% of the students would probably or definitely recommend the activity to another student ($M = 4.53$, $SD = .68$; seven-point scale).

Analysis of the qualitative comments supports the quantitative assessments. Overall, the students found the activity vastly rewarding in vividly revealing classroom concepts in a real-world retail setting. Additionally, they truly enjoyed getting out of the classroom for learning opportunities and shared positive feelings about the experience. As suggested by Schaller (2020), the analysis of the qualitative comments provided to the open-ended questions reveal that the RSH: (1) reinforces course material discussed in class, and the textbook, (2) enhances students' understanding of how course material and concepts are applied in a real-world context, (3) increases engagement and motivation to learn, and (4) heightens their awareness of how marketing influences consumer behavior. Additionally, a new theme identified from our data indicates that students seem to realize how the experience helps them develop a new perspective—a new marketing lens—on shopping behavior.

The most frequent comments to the open-ended questions emphasized the first two themes: “*I enjoyed looking and applying the concepts from the lectures. It’s interesting to see the details come to life*” and, “*I enjoyed applying the classroom concepts in the real world*”; “*I think it’s a very effective way for me to learn*”; “*It was very interesting to see the different products and how they are placed inside the store on the shelves.*” It was clear that venturing out of the classroom also increased motivation to learn and student engagement, as exemplified in this quote: “*I thought the most interesting aspect of the Retail Scavenger Hunt was seeing all the different stores that the other students visited. I just find it so amazing that every store displays similar marketing concepts. Makes me wonder if competitors look for tips from each other or if they each have their own way of doing things.*” Other comments showed similar curiosity emerging in students' minds as they encountered course topics in the “field” and concepts evolved from abstract ideas to concrete examples. Most importantly, the activity heightened students' awareness of how the marketplace influences consumer behavior. As one student reflects, “*I never noticed, until I did this assignment, how things are priced to get you to pick it up.*”

Lastly, as CPG companies see in their employees when conducting a store check, we observe students develop a *marketing lens* as an outcome of this short exercise. Many comments highlighted how participation in the RSH gave students a new and different perspective on the in-store execution of marketing strategies. Most students commented on

their enhanced understanding of the marketing tactics used by retailers. As one student remarked: *“It helped me realize that marketing plays a key part in a consumers decision in what they buy”*; another student commented, *“There were many marketing strategies inside the store such as marketing mix that offers different prices specifically for a certain product”*; and *“Everything matters, from the music to the smells to the displays.”*

When asked, “what would you change about the RSH?” students indicated that they would like to compare marketing initiatives from different retail stores and cross-brands, would like a list of terms/clues to be reviewed in class, prior to participation, and a discussion about a better understanding of “why” certain marketing initiatives are implemented by brands. Some students wanted the clues to be more challenging and wanted to provide their thoughts on the marketing initiatives they observed in-store. For instance, students indicated they wanted to be asked, “Would you take advantage of X promotion?” and “Do you think this marketing tactic is effective?” Overwhelmingly, students wanted an incentive to be offered for their participation in the RSH.

Discussion

Recalling the pivotal role of store checks in the Consumer Packaged Goods (CPG) industry, as highlighted in the introduction, employees in marketing-focused organizations like Unilever and Kimberly-Clark find these evaluations indispensable for understanding brand performance in the marketplace. These routine evaluations provide valuable insights into marketing best practices and retailers’ strategic initiatives, playing a crucial role in fostering better relationships with consumers. For students aspiring to join such marketing-centric organizations, hands-on experiences like the RSH serve as an invaluable bridge between academic learning and real-world marketing practices. The RSH, a versatile short-term field-based activity, has traditionally been executed in an instructor-led format for optimal student discussion and engagement. Yet, the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic led to its adaptation into a self-directed format, ensuring safe social distancing while still offering a rich and engaging experience for large introductory marketing courses in business colleges. The results of our study highlight the significant value that students derive from field-based learning.

Prior research underscores the advantages of integrating real-world experiences into marketing education. Rapert and Mukherjee (2020) introduced the “retail safari,” a field-based endeavor designed to translate classroom teachings into tangible retail experiences. This approach contrasts with the RSH in various aspects. To begin with, the “retail safari” duration spanned three class periods, whereas the RSH was conducted in a single session. Additionally, the “retail safari” involved collaboration with 17 executives across two retail locations, a level of engagement that might not be universally achievable. In contrast, the RSH centered around a single retail location without executive involvement. Participants of both activities found value in their respective experiences. Those involved in the “retail safari” felt it provided practical insights and prepared them for real-world scenarios. On the other hand, RSH participants appreciated the unique retail marketing perspective it offered, even if it was on a different scale. It’s also worth noting that the “retail safari” had the backing of a national leadership organization, the Network of Executive Women. Furthermore, its participants were students from a capstone course, unlike the broader student base of the RSH. The “retail safari” also necessitated discussions with key retail stakeholders, such as buyers, suppliers, and category analysts, to delve into current business challenges and trends. A distinctive feature of the “retail safari” was the requirement for students to document their experiences on LinkedIn

and compile a glossary of terms discussed during the activity (Rapert and Mukherjee, 2020). In summary, the “retail safari” and the RSH offer distinct experiential learning opportunities, each with its own advantages and logistical considerations. Rather than suggesting one format’s superiority over the other, it’s essential to recognize the unique value each brings to marketing education, depending on the context and resources available.

Scavenger hunts, on the other hand, are easily deployable and adaptable for various purposes. Yet, we are not the first to incorporate a scavenger hunt into a marketing course. Schaller (2020) conducted a scavenger hunt with college students, but the RSH is distinct from this activity. Unlike the RSH, which focuses on imparting ‘work-ready’ skills and encouraging students to closely observe the inner workings of retail stores and the execution of various tactics, Schaller (2020) aimed to explore a marketplace broadly, such as a shopping mall through the scavenger hunt activity. In Schaller’s scavenger hunt design, students were not required to enter stores to answer questions. Instead, they could gather information from common areas in a shopping center, as they only had to answer about 15 questions centered on broad consumer behavior concepts in the marketplace (Schaller, 2020). Moreover, guidance on how to scale or administer the activity as a self-directed exercise is lacking from their study. This is particularly relevant and timely, as our results reveal no significant differences across implementation modes. Such guidance would especially benefit instructors teaching large courses and multiple modalities.

Students indicated that the RSH activity effectively reinforced course material. Students could see, first-hand, several examples of promotional signage, such as call-to-action (CTA) and point-of-sale (POS) signs. Students saw freestanding displays, alternate placement of products, endcaps, and examples of product/brand extensions. Students easily connected the classroom concepts and terms with the live visuals. Students understood *why* marketers and retailers must go through numerous processes to effectively meet their consumers’ needs and wants. Marketers and retailers go through the strategic marketing process to assess resource allocations; they create consumer journey maps to learn the touchpoints of consumers to influence purchase decisions, and they conduct market research to gain insights into “what is missing” in the marketplace.

With this accessible experiential learning activity, students became more interested in strategic marketing executions. They began to question and analyze why certain initiatives were executed and became acutely aware of how in-store marketing initiatives unconsciously influence their own purchasing decisions. Several students indicated that the RSH enlightened their knowledge of stores’ design, pricing strategies, and product placement. Examples of these learnings were that students realized that milk and eggs are always shelved in the back of the grocery store. Because of the distance (from the store entrance), this placement fosters a more extended shopping experience. More time in the store can mean more money spent during shopping trips. Students learned that products shelved on endcaps are not on sale despite their prime location, and yellow price tags on the shelf do not mean the product is on sale. Students were shocked that PL products are strategically placed beside/near national brands. Consumers can select products based on price and, in some instances, may select the wrong product because of the similarities in imagery and packaging (between the PL and national-brand products). Experiential learning enabled these insights to blossom. Personal interaction with the retailer’s products, observing in-store marketing initiatives, and developing brand equity could not have been replicated in the classroom.

The findings suggest that this activity can be easily scaled, not only to accommodate social distancing, as it was needed during a pandemic academic year, but also for large classes in which the logistics of coordinating a visit to a store may prove the most challenging. The instructor-led executional mode offers the advantage of in-the-moment instruction. For example, while perusing the grocery store during the RSH, the instructor showed the students the differences between grid, racetrack, and free-form store layouts. However, the self-directed executional mode can help overcome implementation barriers such as logistical issues, time costs, transportation needs, and administrative approval. This execution mode also affords students a great deal of agency over the activity since they can have more control over the experience and flexibility over the time, location, etc.

It is important to note that some costs are involved in setting up an app-based scavenger hunt, which is around \$3 per student for the system used in this study. This fee can be covered either by the student or the institution. Interestingly, the results showed that students found the instructions better when delivered through the app, likely due to the system's ability to provide additional links, photos, and descriptions beyond the clues, compared to the paper version used in the instructor-led format. Although students in the instructor-led execution could ask the instructor for help, they may prefer to search for information on their smartphones. From the instructor's perspective, the self-directed mode allows all submissions to be easily sorted and used for class discussion through the website interface. The self-directed execution also provided rich media content for the debrief session, compared to the written submissions in the paper format.

Conclusion and Future Implications

Designing a short-term, field-based, active learning activity that is fun, engaging, complements course material and concepts, and incorporates theoretical support can be complex (Schaller, 2020). However, the RSH is straightforward to execute. Creating the clues for the instructor is the activity's most time-consuming aspect. However, once created, these clues may be used for small or large class sizes, in-person or online, during a 50- or 75-minute class session, and for classes focused on marketing, advertising, branding, social media, or retailing. While the authors implemented two executional formats for the RSH, the key learnings are similar. By participating in the RSH, students can apply classroom concepts to a real-world situation, obtain a new marketing lens about retailers' marketing strategies, and enjoyment from getting out of the classroom.

In comparing the Retail Scavenger Hunt (RSH) with the "retail safari," several key differences emerge. The RSH offers ease of execution, requiring only a single class period, and does not necessitate proximity to a major retailer or its executives. While the "retail safari" provides a deeper dive into the retail world, its scope and caliber might pose challenges for widespread adoption among educators. Both formats have their merits, and the choice between them should be based on the course's specific learning objectives and logistical considerations.

For those interested in implementing an RSH, there are a plethora of ideas for enhancement. Based on students' feedback, they would have preferred the clues presented in class before the activity was conducted. With an advanced screening of the clues, students could ask questions for clarification and feel more prepared for the actual activity. The authors recommend that the students complete a survey prior to participation. The survey could obtain information on students' attitudes towards grocery shopping, including the average amount they spend during grocery trips, their preferred grocery retailer, the proximity of their preferred

retailer, the frequency of their grocery shopping trips, and a list of items typically purchased. The collected data will provide insights into the categories that could be targeted during the Retail Shopping Habits (RSH) study. If applicable, instructors may offer options for the RSH completion—either online (by a specific date) or during in-class (scheduled on a specific date).

Other enhancements, although more time-consuming, would be comparing and contrasting clue responses between retail outlets across or within a channel. For instance, an RSH could be conducted at a Walmart or a Target store to understand the similarities and differences of in-store marketing initiatives or between a grocery store (i.e., Kroger) and a drug store (i.e., Walgreens). For simplicity, an RSH could be executed within one category or industry within any channel. Students could easily search for RSH clues within one category, such as health and beauty or frozen food. For most marketing courses, students are tasked with a semester-long project to develop their knowledge of the basic foundations of marketing (i.e., 4 Ps, target consumer, SWOT analysis, etc.). The RSH could easily be incorporated into such a project or remain a standalone assignment. With these executions, the RSH includes an academic performance indicator.

Experiential learning opportunities enable students to apply classroom learning in a real-world application (Kolb, 1984). The RSH enables students to have such an experience. An in-person observation of how retailers influence purchasing decisions with promotional signage and strategic product placement is the optimal experience for students to retain and understand textbook and classroom material. Whether designed as an instructor-led or a self-directed app-based exercise, the RSH is a rewarding, short-term field-based experiential learning opportunity for students, where instructors may incorporate foundational marketing and retailing concepts into a live retail setting.

Appendix A

Table 1. Sections

RSH Execution	n
<i>Instructor-led</i>	
Principles of Marketing (2 sections Fall 2020 & 2 sections Spring 2021)	40
Retailing (1 section Fall 2020 & 1 section Spring 2021)	42
<i>Self-directed</i>	
Principles of Marketing (2 sections Fall 2020)	85
Total	167

Table 2. Student Profiles

Demographics (n= 167)					
<i>Gender</i>			<i>Age</i>		
Male	90	54%	18-20	41	25%
Female	76	45%	21-25	103	62%
Missing	1	1%	26-30	10	6%
<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>			Over 30	9	5%
American Indian or Alaska Native	1	1%	Missing	4	2%
Asian	10	6%	<i>College Standing</i>		
Black or African American	19	11%	Sophomore	8	5%
Hispanic or LatinX	46	27%	Junior	98	59%
Mixed	11	7%	Senior	60	36%
White/Caucasian	79	47%	Missing	1	1%
Missing	1	1%			

Table 3. Comparison of Retail Scavenger Hunt Execution Modes

Survey Question	Instructor-Led, M (SD), n = 82	Self-Directed, M (SD), n = 85	t Statistic	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Cohen's d
Overall, how would you rate the Retail Scavenger Hunt as a learning tool? (7-point scale)						
Bad experience - Good experience	6.27 (1.35)	6.40 (1.06)	-0.70	153	0.49	-0.11
Ineffective - Effective *	6.40 (1.30)	6.65 (0.57)	-1.56	110	0.12	-0.25
Useless – Useful *	6.34 (1.24)	6.56 (0.68)	-1.44	125	0.15	-0.22
Unsatisfactory - Satisfactory	6.10 (1.38)	6.13 (1.49)	-0.14	165	0.89	-0.02
Bad Instructions – Good Instructions *	6.02 (1.58)	6.51 (0.83)	-2.46	121	0.02	-0.39
Does not add value – Adds value *	6.23 (1.57)	6.35 (1.35)	-0.54	160	0.59	-0.08
Would you recommend this activity to another student? (5-point scale)	4.45 (0.76)	4.60 (0.60)	-1.40	155	0.16	-0.22
Note: *Items were originally presented in reverse order and recoded to reflect higher scores for more favorable evaluations of the attribute. df = degrees of freedom (n = 167)						

Appendix B Scavenger Hunt Guide

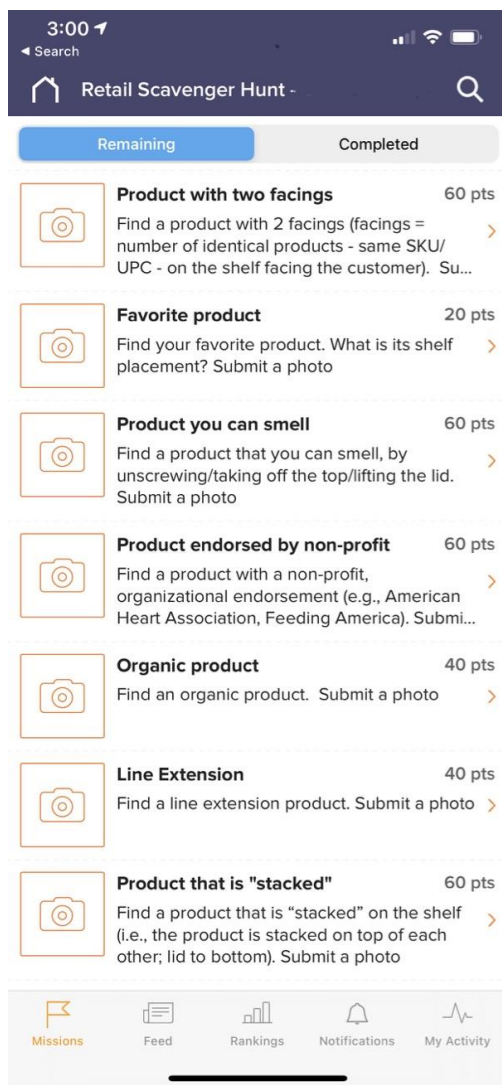
Retailing Mix	Questions
Product (width and depth of product assortment)	Find a product with the label “new” on it. Submit a photo
	Find a private-label product. Submit a photo
	Find a national brand product. Submit a photo
	Find a brand block (e.g., arranging products that belong to the same brand together in the same display area). Submit a photo
	Find a product at eye level. Submit a photo
	Find a product with “alternate placement” (e.g., outside of its category, like chips in the beer section). Submit a photo. Where is the alternate placement? Which category should the product be in?
	Find a product with two facings (facings = number of identical products - same SKU/UPC - on the shelf facing the customer). Submit a photo
	Find an out-of-stock product. Submit a photo
	Find a product that has a quantity of 10+. (Meaning one package has 10+ items inside the package). Submit a photo
	Find a product that a celebrity endorses. Submit a photo
	Find a line of products. Submit a photo
	Find a line extension product. Submit a photo
	Find a product category that contains one primary color on shelf (e.g., all the products in a category are the same color). Submit a photo
	Find a product shelved in a tray (i.e., the product is inside a removable tray on the shelf; the tray is not permanent). Submit a photo
	Find a product in the checkout aisle. Submit a photo. What is the price?
	Find an item containing two or more products (in 1 package offering) but only 1 SKU. Submit a photo
	Find a unique packaging design. Submit a photo. Why do you think it is unique?
	Find a product with unique typography (i.e., the font style) on its label. Submit a photo
	Find an item that can be purchased in bulk. What is the product? How many products are in the bulk package? Submit a photo
	Find a local product (i.e., product is made by a local company). What is the product? What local company produces it? Where is the local company located (city, state)? Submit a photo
	Find a product that you can smell, by unscrewing/taking off the top/lifting the lid. Submit a photo
	Find a premium/luxury product (i.e., an expensive item sold in this type of retailer). Submit a photo. What was the price? How difficult was it to find?
	Find an organic product. Submit a photo
	Find a product on the bottom shelf. Submit a photo
	Find a product that offers an additional product (i.e., Crest toothpaste with Crest toothbrush). Submit a photo
	Find a product on clearance. Submit a photo
	Find a refrigerated product. Submit a photo
	Find a product that targets Moms. Submit a photo. How did you determine its target market?
	Find a product that targets kids. Submit a photo. How did you determine its target market?
	Find a product that targets Baby Boomers. Submit a photo. How did you determine its target market?
Find a product in a glass-enclosed shelf. Submit a photo	
Find a product manufactured by another food establishment (e.g., “Restaurant Name” bacon). Submit a photo	
Find a product that is “stacked” on the shelf (i.e., product is stacked on top of each other; lid to bottom). Submit a photo	

Retailing Mix	Questions
	Name a unique offering, product, or service observed inside the retail store
	Find a product found at the front entrance of the retail store. Submit a photo
	Find a product shelved in an (aisle) cooler. Submit a photo
	Find a product with a QR code on its packaging. Submit a photo
	Find a product with a non-profit, organizational endorsement (e.g., American Heart Association, Feeding America). Submit a photo
	Find a product with the brand's social media logos printed on packaging (e.g., Facebook, Twitter). Submit a photo
	Find your favorite product. What is its shelf placement? Submit a photo
	Find a product that is placed in two different categories/two different aisles. (Name both)
	Find a product imported to the US. Submit a photo. Which country is it from?
	Find an ethnic product (i.e., a product that is made for a specific ethnic demographic). Submit a photo
Promotion (advertising, publicity, public relations, sales promotions)	Find a call-to-action sign (e.g., tells the customer TO DO something now). Submit a photo
	Take a photo of store signage that gets your attention
	Find a BOGO (Buy one, get one free) sign. Submit a photo
	Find a product that is located on a display. Submit a photo. What category is the display located?
	Find a specialized area for promotions. Submit a photo. What products were on sale?
	Find an endcap display. Submit a photo.
	Find another type of in-store promotion. Submit a photo
Find a unique category sign. Why is it unique? Submit a photo	
Price (pricing tactics, grocery store tricks)	Find a yellow tag on the shelf. What is the price? What product is it for? Submit a photo
	Find a product on sale. Submit a photo. How much is the product discounted?
	Find a price that does not end with a "9". What was the price? What product was it for? Submit a photo
	Find a product with an instant redeemable coupon on it (e.g., "Buy now, save \$0.55!"). Submit a photo
Presentation (Layout and atmosphere)	How is the lighting in the store? (e.g., bright, dull, warm)
	What colors pop in the store?
	Is there music playing in the store? And if so, what kind? Submit a short video that captures the music
	What does it smell like in the store?
	Are there windows inside or outside the store? Submit a picture of one of the windows
	Submit a photo of the exterior of the store. What stood out to you?
	What does the interior of the store look like? Submit a photo and describe what stood out
	Submit a photo of the store's landscaping
	Describe the entrance: Was there a greeter? Did you enter and exit through the same doors? Were there multiple entrances? Take a picture of the entrance to the store.
	Is the store clean?
	Are carts available upon entrance? Take a picture
Where are essential items such as milk and eggs located?	
Personnel (customer service and personal selling)	How many employee-staffed checkout lines are open?
	Did the retailer offer free food samples? If yes, what sample did they offer?
	What is the retailer's competitive advantage?
	What other services does the retailer provide?
	Does the retailer offer a rewards program?
	Does the retailer offer delivery services?
	Does the retailer offer a "pickup/to go" service?
What type of area is the retailer located in? (e.g., urban, downtown)	

Retailing Mix	Questions
Placement (location and operation hours)	What other stores are located near/attached to the retailer?
	What are the hours of operation of the retailer? Submit a photo
	Approximately how many miles is the retailer from your home?
	Is the retailer located off a major interstate?
	Was it easy to access the retail location?
	Approximately how long did it take you to drive to the retail location?
	What competitors are close by?

Appendix C

Figure 1. Screenshot of app-based self-directed execution of RSH



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