The Marketing Ethics Course: Current State and Future Directions

O. C. Ferrell and Dawn L. Keig

Journal of Marketing Education 2013 35: 119 originally published online 17 June 2013
DOI: 10.1177/0273475313491498

Journal of Marketing Education
35(2) 119–128

DOI: 10.1177/0273475313491498
jmed.sagepub.com
SAGE

The Marketing Ethics Course: Current State and Future Directions

O. C. Ferrell[1] and Dawn L. Keig[2]

Abstract

Many of the critical issues facing modern businesses can be considered marketing ethics issues. It follows that as the field of business ethics has evolved, marketing has played a key role in the development of business ethics education. Despite a general trend of increasingly larger amounts of ethical content included in business curricula, prior studies have shown there are no significant numbers of courses specifically designed with a focus on *marketing ethics* in university business programs. This exploratory study examines the current implementation of the stand-alone marketing ethics course. Using a comparative case study method, we describe a variety of different approaches currently being used in the definition and delivery of stand-alone marketing ethics courses. We offer recommendations for the future of the marketing ethics course and discuss related research opportunities. Our goal is to inform and inspire further development and refinement of marketing curricula that incorporate marketing ethics content.

Keywords

marketing ethics, marketing ethics course, marketing education, business ethics

As the field of business ethics has evolved, marketing has played a key role in the development of the general business ethics course as well as some stand-alone marketing ethics courses. One reason for this might be that many of the critical issues facing modern businesses can be considered marketing ethics issues (Murphy, 2010), such as supply chain integrity, social issues such as obesity, the truthfulness of advertising claims, consumer protection, and product quality. Marketing ethics scholars have been significant contributors to business ethics theory and research. Several of the original ethical decision-making models emerged from marketing scholarship, such as the Ferrell–Gresham (1985) and the Hunt–Vitell (1986) frameworks, and they remain among the most highly cited studies in the marketing ethics and management literature. Recent literature reviews confirm that issues of marketing ethics continue to grow in importance to the marketing profession (Schlegelmilch & Öberseder, 2010).

In response to increased media exposure from high-profile corporate ethical scandals and with the encouragement and requirements of accrediting bodies, most business schools have increased their coverage of the ethical components in their curricula (Sims & Felton, 2006). Business schools recognize that they are responsible for influencing their graduates' capacity for ethical decision making (McAlister, 2004). Despite this trend toward a greater emphasis on ethics in general business education, recent findings suggest that the marketing profession's level of interest in integrating ethics into marketing education have been conflicting. An analysis of the marketing literature revealed that education was the second most researched subdiscipline within marketing ethics (Nill & Schibrowsky, 2007). However, Schlegelmilch and Öberseder (2010) point out that although the educational aspects of marketing ethics may have a high number of total publications, the topic's relatively lower number of citations indicates marketing ethics education may be a *less* important topic overall for the marketing discipline.

Only 25% of AACSB-accredited business schools in the United States require a stand-alone *general* business ethics course in their undergraduate curriculum (Rutherford, Parks, Cavazos, & White, 2012). This definition of a business ethics course includes business and society, as well as related courses. Significantly fewer schools offer a stand-alone *marketing* ethics or related course. Prior studies have shown that there are not a significant number of courses specifically designed and positioned with a focus on marketing ethics in university business programs. Loe and Ferrell (2001) found only three business schools that were

[1]University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM, USA
[2]Brenau University, Gainesville, GA, USA

Corresponding Author:
Dawn L. Keig, College of Business and Mass Communication, Brenau University, Gainesville, GA 30501, USA.
Email: dkeig@brenau.edu

delivering a stand-alone marketing ethics course at that time, noting that prior research in the 1980s and 1990s revealed equally small numbers. This leads to the research question explored in the current project: What is the current state of the marketing ethics course?

This exploratory study takes an updated look at the current implementation of the marketing ethics course. Our goal is to inform and inspire further development and refinement of marketing curricula that incorporate marketing ethics content. Using a comparative case study method, we describe a variety of different approaches currently being used in the definition and delivery of stand-alone marketing ethics courses. We conclude by offering recommendations for the future of the marketing ethics course and discussing related research opportunities.

Background

As a subset of business ethics (Murphy, 2002), marketing ethics focuses on ethical situations of relevance to the domain of marketing (Schlegelmilch, 1998). Because of marketing's position as a key boundary spanning function (Hult, 2011), what constitutes acceptable standards of behavior for marketing activities will be strongly influenced by the organization's constituents and stakeholders (Ferrell, 2007). Marketing ethics, therefore, is concerned with "how moral standards are applied to marketing decisions, behaviors and institutions" (Murphy, Laczniak, Bowie, & Klein, 2005, p. xvii). Marketing ethics includes individual and group decision making and the evaluation of outcomes by stakeholders.

One of the key decisions when covering marketing ethics in a course is whether to take a normative approach or a descriptive approach to understanding ethical decision making. Either or both approaches can be used for resolving ethical issues and dilemmas. Hunt (1991) defines normative marketing as attempting "to describe what marketing organizations or individuals ought to do or what kinds of marketing systems a society ought to have" (p. 12). One of the leading models of ethical decision making, the Hunt–Vitell model is a descriptive model about normative relationships in ethical decision making (Hunt & Vitell, 1986). The descriptive approach attempts to show relationships among the greatest influences in ethical decision making. In other words, descriptive models help the student understand how ethical decisions are made and the many variables that influence these decisions rather than providing a prescription for issue resolution. For example, this approach would help describe how to establish ethical leadership, codes of ethics, and an ethical organizational culture. Many courses use both normative and descriptive approaches to understanding ethical decision making.

The scope of marketing ethics is admittedly broad. In the most comprehensive marketing ethics literature review to date, Schlegelmilch and Öberseder (2010) identified a wide range of topics encompassed by marketing ethics. Most of the identified topical areas have potential relevance to marketing ethics education. This includes ethical issues related to the functional areas of marketing (product, price, distribution, and promotion), the sales function, corporate decision making, consumers (including vulnerable consumer groups), international marketing, marketing research, as well as ethics and compliance programs. Their findings also highlight the influence of more recent emerging aspects of marketing ethics, including green marketing, social marketing, and other ethical marketing practice implications related to the Internet. Their resulting categorization scheme aligns closely with the prior marketing ethics scholarship review undertaken by Nill and Schibrowsky (2007).

Different universities have chosen a variety of approaches to implementing marketing ethics coursework within their business programs. There is no clear agreement within the business ethics education community regarding which method of infusing marketing ethics into business school curricula is preferable (Sims & Felton, 2006). Some scholars call for embedding and integrating ethical content into multiple courses (Abela & Murphy, 2008; Beggs, 2011; Beggs & Dean, 2007), though this may potentially result in a superficial treatment of the topic (Brennan, Eagle, Ellis, & Higgins, 2010). Some business schools have chosen a stand-alone approach, with dedicated courses focused specifically on ethics (Petrick, Cragg, & Sanudo, 2011). Others conclude that a modular or hybrid mix of both stand-alone and embedded program components may be the optimal approach (Hartman & Werhane, 2009; Ritter, 2006). Because the stand-alone course continues to be espoused to satisfy some or all of the ethical content delivery, this study focuses on the current state of the *stand-alone* marketing ethics course.

Methodology

The objective of this exploratory study is to identify and describe a variety of approaches currently in use by business programs delivering stand-alone marketing ethics courses as a means of inspiring and informing future curriculum development. To accomplish this goal, consistent with prior marketing course examinations (Crittenden & Crittenden, 2006; Crittenden & Wilson, 2006), detailed content analysis of course syllabi was used as the methodological approach in this study.

To obtain our cases, we randomly selected 250 AACSB-accredited business school programs around the world from the 644 available on the AACSB website. We used university website information to determine which business programs have recently offered or whose catalogues specify a dedicated marketing ethics course. Additionally, we performed general web searches for marketing ethics syllabi and also queried academic message board members who teach and/or research in business ethics for additional input, resulting in

an additional eight potential course leads. We did not necessarily attempt to be exhaustive in our search; however, we did aim to provide breadth of exposure to current practices in the area of stand-alone marketing ethics education.

Using the information available on university websites, 36 of the examined universities had a course that appeared to be a candidate for a stand-alone marketing ethics course based on course description. To confirm appropriateness of including courses in our sample and to enable content analysis, full course syllabi were either obtained from university websites or received directly from responsible professors for 28 of the courses, which became our final sample for this exploratory study.

Using the course syllabi, one investigator compiled university demographic information, including university location and accreditation (AACSB or not), and basic course information, including course number, title, graduate/undergraduate designation, required/elective designation, and syllabus year, for each sample course. Course learning materials (books, cases, videos, and other readings) were also noted, as well as pedagogical methods (individual and group activities, assignments, exams, etc.) where specified. All course learning objectives and content elements from the syllabi were initially listed individually, and then the lists were coded and consolidated, resulting in summarized lists of objectives and content. A second investigator reviewed the coded data to confirm accuracy. Any discrepancies between the two coders were discussed and resolved prior to data analysis.

Sample Description

Our final sample of representative stand-alone marketing ethics courses is composed of a wide variety of courses from 28 different university business programs in the North American, European, and Asia-Pacific regions. The majority of these universities (54%) were located in the United States; another 21% were located in Europe. Our sample also identified three universities with stand-alone marketing ethics courses in Canada as well as in Australia and one in India. Because our primary sample frame was AACSB-accredited universities, all but seven of our sample business programs were AACSB-accredited, and all the unaccredited programs in our sample were located outside the United States, where AACSB penetration is not as substantial (Durand & McGuire, 2005). The sample courses were split fairly evenly between undergraduate (60%) and graduate-level (40%) programs. Only three of the sampled stand-alone marketing ethics courses were *mandatory* components of the business curriculum; in all other cases, the courses were available to students as program *electives*.

The titles of the sample courses were inspected. As expected (because of the relative rarity of stand-alone marketing ethics courses), the titles of the courses we reviewed varied widely, though most were clearly identifiable as having a marketing focus by the course name. Almost half (46%) of the course titles contained some combination of the terms *marketing* and *ethics* ("Marketing Ethics," "Marketing Ethics & Practices," "Ethics in Marketing," "Ethical Issues in Marketing," "Business Ethics & Marketing"). Another third of the courses were identified as "Marketing & Society" or "Marketing Ethics & Society." Other course titles that each appeared once in our sample included "Business Ethics & Social Responsibility," "Environmental Issues in Marketing," "Environmental Marketing," "Ethics & Public Policy for Marketers and Consumers," "Regulatory Environment & Ethics," and "Stakeholder Marketing."

In terms of the learning materials specified in the syllabi, case studies and non-textbook readings were assigned in a frequency equal to academic textbooks. Most courses used a combination of two or more of these learning materials, resulting in textbooks, cases, and non-textbook readings each being specifically referenced on 60% of the sampled courses. Of the 17 courses specifying textbooks, there was a wide disparity in the textbook choice. Only three academic texts were referenced on two or more syllabi: Murphy et al.'s *Ethical Marketing* (2005); *Business Ethics: Ethical Decision Making & Cases* (Ferrell, Fraedrich, & Ferrell, 2013); and *Ethics in Marketing: International Cases* (Murphy, Laczniak, & Prothero, 2012). Almost 40% of the stand-alone marketing ethics courses also specifically mentioned the use of video-based resources as classroom learning materials, and a variety of courses incorporated guest lecturers and corporate site visits into the curricula.

Specific non-textbook readings were also identifiable on 17 of the sample syllabi, either in lieu of or as a supplement to formal textbooks. Only 9 of the more than 250 non-textbook readings specified appeared on more than one syllabus, reflecting the wide variety of marketing ethics course focus topics and lack of correspondingly clear seminal literature base. Seven of the multireferenced items represented journal articles: "Ethical Challenges of Social Marketing" (Brenkert, 2002), "The Social Responsibility of Business Is to Increase Its Profits" (Friedman, 1970), "Fear Appeals in Social Marketing: Strategic and Ethical Reasons for Concern" (Hastings, Stead, & Webb, 2004), "The Distorted Mirror: Reflections on the Unintended Consequences of Advertising" (Pollay, 1986), "Strategy and Society: The Link Between Competitive Advantage and Corporate Social Responsibility" (Porter & Kramer, 2006), "What Does It Mean to Be Green?" (Kleiner, 1991), and "Marketing's Contribution to Society" (Wilke & Moore, 1999). Two mainstream business books also appeared more than once on the sample courses: *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* (Klein, 2000) and *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, & Happiness* (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008).

In terms of pedagogical methods, the vast majority (82%) of the courses included significant components of discussion

and participation in the course grade. All the courses except one specified some kind of individual paper, essay, or other individually graded activities. Most courses (75%) also included a group paper, presentation, or other group activity. Only half of the stand-alone marketing ethics courses in our sample (53%) used any kind of formal exams as an assessment tool. Of particular note is that 40% of the stand-alone marketing ethics courses included one or more case analysis assignments emphasizing critical thinking, and one or more debate activities were employed as a tool for exploring marketing ethics in almost one third of the sample courses (28%).

Course Content Analysis

An examination of the course objectives and topical content of the sample syllabi revealed a wide diversity of content. There was no discernible dominant pattern to the course content. Because such a wide variety of different approaches were represented across the sample, a comparative case study method was chosen to highlight key elements of several of the most common themes.

Case studies are an appropriate choice for "providing answers to 'How?' and 'Why?' questions and in this role can be used for exploratory, descriptive or explanatory research" (Rowley, 2002, p. 16). Yin (2009) points out that the choice of single versus multiple case studies should be made with regard to the specific research purpose. Multiple case studies are used in this study in a comparative fashion to enable a broader and more varied exploration of the phenomenon of interest (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007) and thus are employed in this study.

Approaches to the Marketing Ethics Course

From the content analysis of the selected syllabi, a variety of different *approaches* to stand-alone marketing ethics courses emerged: philosophy focused, managerial, cross-cultural, stakeholder focused, and society focused. These different approaches are representative of the wide diversity of practices and approaches currently in use in delivering a stand-alone marketing ethics course. Each case study represents a mosaic of one or more stand-alone marketing courses in our exploratory sample that are organized around a similar approach or theme. University names are not identified to maintain confidentiality of course materials. Case descriptions highlighting each of the different approaches to the marketing course are subsequently presented, compared, and discussed.

The Philosophy-Focused Marketing Ethics Course

One approach to the stand-alone marketing ethics course can be described as *philosophy focused*. This approach is characterized by a strong grounding in traditional moral philosophies applied in a marketing context. The primary emphasis is on the consideration of the morality (and immorality) of particular marketing practices based on ethical analysis. The course objectives are aimed at encouraging students to use normative principles to critically examine their own values and beliefs as future marketing professionals, understanding the moral dimensions and consequences of potentially difficult marketing situations.

To accomplish this, the philosophy-focused marketing ethics course devotes a large proportion (up to 50%) of total course time to instruction on moral philosophies, such as Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development as well as various deontological and teleological philosophical concepts. This includes an emphasis on critical thinking as well as specific moral philosophy theories that can be used in ethical decision making. Support for such an approach includes the Hunt–Vitell ethical decision-making model, which integrates the normative principles of deontology and teleology into ethical decision making from a marketing perspective (Hunt & Vitell, 1986). This descriptive theory suggests that individuals use teleology and deontology logic in making ethical decisions, but it does not specify an appropriate moral philosophy. By comparing and contrasting a variety of different moral theories and theorists before bringing the discussion into the marketing domain, the philosophy-focused marketing ethics course is intended to give students confidence in viewing ethical issues through a variety of different ethical lenses. Often students are instructed to select a lens for their personal ethical decision making. This would be less likely to occur in a corporate ethics program because organizations establish values, codes of ethics, and required standards to create uniformity in ethical decision making.

Once the basis for ethical analysis and moral decision making has been established, the ethical principles can then be applied to analysis of specific issues of direct relevance to marketing, such as bribery, deceptive advertising and pricing, product design and liability, and marketing research. The ethical foundation established in this course also enables consideration of general business ethics issues, such as monopolistic practices, antitrust risks, and honesty in business dealings. But this approach assumes that the student can make decisions independently of organizational pressures and requirements.

The philosophy-focused marketing ethics course makes a significant investment in providing students with broad philosophical foundations and histories that contribute to ethical analysis based on logic and principles. But one of the potential drawbacks of this approach's strong emphasis on moral philosophy is that typical business school faculty may not necessarily feel they have the appropriate background and training to instruct from a highly philosophical viewpoint. On the other hand, moral philosophies are often

covered in general education courses, including philosophy and the social sciences. Additionally, the teaching of philosophical perspectives without practical application limits students in applying marketing ethics concepts into real-world marketing ethics situations. Because most corporate business ethics training programs do not use philosophical perspectives such as deontology and utilitarianism in their programs, the contributions of a marketing ethics course that is solely philosophy focused to marketing education are questionable. Although many marketing ethics courses might be classified as philosophy focused, most incorporate some form of practical applications into their curriculums. Finally, the most significant weakness of a philosophy-focused course is that students may think they are empowered to independently decide on ethical issues and resolve gray areas without considering legal ramifications, organizational relationships, ethical codes, and ethical policies. Students have to learn that ethical decisions are most often made in teams or groups and can have hidden consequences beyond their own personal viewpoint. Research indicates significant others, including peers and coworkers, will have the most influence on ethical decision making in marketing (Ferrell & Gresham, 1985).

The Managerial Marketing Ethics Course

With its primary emphasis on the practical and applied nature of marketing ethics, the most common approach found in our exploratory study can be described as the *managerial* marketing ethics course. Three main recurring themes appear in the course objectives and content of managerial marketing ethics courses. The first is the development of students' recognition and general understanding of the *breadth* of ethical issues relevant to the domain of marketing. Recognition and awareness is a key element of the ethical decision-making process (Ferrell, Gresham, & Fraedrich, 1989; Hunt & Vitell, 2006; Ritter, 2006; Treviño, 1986). For this reason, managerial marketing ethics courses are among the most comprehensive in terms of the number of marketing-specific topics included in the course. It is not uncommon to see all of the following topics touched on in the course: understanding ethical decision making; market segmentation, particularly the targeting of vulnerable populations; product policy, such as safety and counterfeit products; advertising and sales promotion ethics; personal selling ethics and bribery; pricing and antitrust issues; supply chain exposure; market research and information-gathering practices; international marketing ethics considerations; as well as the general business ethics topics that also relate to marketing, such as ethical leadership and ethics programs, which include codes of ethics, ethics training, and anonymous reporting.

Legal and public policy implications of ethical issues receive coverage. Ethical issues that damage a stakeholder are often resolved through lawsuits. Based on the extensiveness of the list, many managerial marketing ethics courses emphasize *breadth* over depth of marketing ethics issue coverage, in an attempt to expose students to as wide a range as possible of ethical aspects of marketing in the available course time. The course is practical and applied and reflects how ethical decisions are managed in corporations. The student is not taught to be a critic of corporate practices as much as to gain an understanding of how to participate in an organizational culture and still maintain one's personal ethical perspective.

A second recurring theme in managerial marketing ethics course objectives and content is an emphasis on real-world *application* of ethical concepts. These courses are designed to provide students with repeated hands-on opportunities to "test out" their own assumptions regarding a wide variety of marketing ethics scenarios. Creativity in applying decision-making frameworks is encouraged, and course content is structured with the largest proportion of time devoted to active learning methods, such as in-class debates, multimedia presentations, role-play activities, and case analysis discussions.

A third common component of managerial marketing ethics courses is an emphasis on the impact of ethical behavior on the *profession* of marketing. By highlighting the role of individual professional responsibility on marketing as a profession, these courses can help students develop an understanding of the ethical implications of their future actions at a professional level. Guest speakers, practitioner interview assignments, and professional ethics code reviews are examples of learning tools used in support of this objective.

In managerial marketing ethics courses, one or more formal ethical decision-making frameworks may be introduced briefly in early class sessions, but there is typically significantly less depth of coverage of moral philosophers or philosophies, in stark comparison to the philosophy-focused approach to the marketing ethics course, which devotes significant time to philosophical foundations. The managerial marketing ethics course moves quickly into practical application with a real-world emphasis. However, how to effectively incorporate the wide breadth and diversity of marketing ethics topical coverage within available class time constraints remains a challenge.

As with a philosophy-based focus, marketing ethics courses that are entirely practice oriented have several limitations. The major limitation of a managerial marketing ethics course is that the breadth of coverage may provide insufficient knowledge on specific topics to effectively prepare the student for dilemmas that may be faced in the work environment. Students may not gain as many personal perspectives on how to resolve ethical conflicts and how to use foundational principles to resolve issues. On the other hand, the goal may be to gain an appreciation for the complexity and knowledge needed in marketing ethical decision making.

The Cross-Cultural Marketing Ethics Course

Some universities have chosen to deliver their marketing ethics content via a *cross-cultural* marketing ethics course. The emphasis is on developing students' sensitivity to differences in moral norms and ethical expectations between countries based on unique cultures, traditions, and values development over time. By focusing on the ethical tensions associated with cross-cultural *differences*, this approach to the marketing ethics course aims to develop marketing professionals with global sensitivity to the wide range of ethical expectations they may be confronted with in international marketing settings.

To accomplish this goal, first the foundations of moral norms are examined. How do moral norms develop and evolve? Why and how do they vary from country to country? What can we expect, and how can we be more aware of and sensitive to these differences? Then individual ethical decision making within this context of culturally influenced differences in moral norms can be examined through the application of marketing-specific scenarios.

The cross-cultural marketing ethics course provides the ethical diversity dimension that organizations face in global marketing. Most global corporations recognize that they should not try to adapt their ethics to local social norms, such as bribing government officials, and maintain compliance with their own country's laws and norms. But in developing global standardized ethics programs, they have to understand cultural differences to avoid damaging ethical conflicts. Communicating ethical standards and codes requires understanding cultural differences.

A cross-cultural marketing ethics course provides much more depth of coverage on international issues related to competition, bribery, consumer protection, and product safety. It is important in this course that students learn that multinational corporations develop their own core values and ethics programs and do not necessarily adapt these values to fit each country. The ethical dimension of global marketing is different from marketing strategies where many elements or variables are adapted to local desires. A limitation could occur if students get the impression that ethics is relative to the local culture. This is because there are strategic options to adapt marketing to fit into a particular country. On the other hand, there are subcultures even in a single country that require understanding to implement marketing ethics. The marketing ethics issues addressed are much narrower in scope and often are more macro and normative than managerial.

The Stakeholder-Focused Marketing Ethics Course

Another approach to the marketing ethics course can be characterized as being *stakeholder focused*. Establishing a strong stakeholder orientation is becoming increasingly important for firms' ethics and social responsibility as well as financial performance (Maignan, Gonzalez-Padron, Hult, & Ferrell, 2011). A stakeholder-oriented marketing ethics course extends consideration of the ethical implications of the marketing function beyond the traditional customer focus to include a wider range of stakeholders, including the other five stakeholders: regulatory bodies, communities, suppliers, shareholders, and employees. The development and maintenance of positive stakeholder relationships is emphasized as a marketing priority, and this alignment is considered a key part of marketing strategy.

This course approach differs slightly from all three of the prior marketing ethics course profiles in that the ethical consideration of stakeholder-oriented marketing at a *strategic* level takes precedence over examination of individual ethical decisions. This view can be valuable in that it enables marketing students to develop an understanding of the role of stakeholder engagement in establishing marketing strategy.

Using a stakeholder framework for marketing ethics provides the opportunity to include many features of the managerial marketing ethics course. A stakeholder orientation is a management philosophy that goes beyond market orientation and its emphasis on customers and competitors (Ferrell, Gonzalez-Padron, Hult, & Maignan, 2010). A stakeholder orientation prioritizes all stakeholders and develops long-term relationships to create value with those stakeholders that relate to the organization. Therefore, this marketing ethics course can include ethical considerations that are important to all primary stakeholders as well as secondary stakeholders such as special-interest groups, competitors, the media, and more. Although many of the same ethical issues may be covered in a stakeholder course as would be covered in a managerial marketing ethics course or a marketing and society course, the stakeholder course has a much more robust framework created from the abundant amount of stakeholder literature in marketing and management. Research indicates that a stakeholder orientation is associated with many positive marketing outcomes, including financial performance (Maignan et al., 2011).

A number of the stakeholder-focused marketing ethics courses specifically focus their content on one particular stakeholder group, *environmental* stakeholders. "Environmental concerns are frequently at the top of the list of social expectations a company has to face" (Harvey & Schaefer, 2001, p. 243). Although a particular focus on environmental stakeholders might preclude coverage of the ethical considerations of other organizational stakeholder dimensions, there are abundant examples in the marketing literature that can be called on to support an environmental focus. For example, Home Depot has set stringent quality requirements with its wood suppliers based on its perception of stakeholder environmental expectations (Maignan, Ferrell, & Ferrell, 2005).

Limitations of the stakeholder approach often include a greater emphasis on social responsibility and usually less on ethical decision making. If social responsibility is the desired emphasis, then course objectives can be achieved. Another limitation of the stakeholder orientation approach is that it applies to more of a top management perspective. Many entry-level positions will not have the ability to make the types of decisions that build relationships with the diversity of stakeholders important to an organization.

The Society-Focused Social Issues Marketing Ethics Course

The final approach to business schools currently delivering marketing ethics courses in our sample is found in *society-focused social issues* marketing ethics courses. The domain of social responsibility and marketing as defined by Wilkie and Moore (2012) highlight the broad emphasis of marketing and society by subdividing the current research of marketing and society into eight main subdisciplines: public policy and marketing, macromarketing, consumer economics, marketing ethics, international consumer policy, transformative consumer research, and the Subsistence Marketplace Initiative. Some of the most prominent topics covered in this course include social issues, consumer protection, sustainability, and corporate governance. These courses revolve around issues in society that interface with marketing strategy and decision making. The courses often view content and cases on issues such as sustainability, obesity, privacy, consumer protection legislation, marketing to children, discrimination, misleading advertising, deceptive sales practices, bribery, and more. Given the growing interest in sustainability and the corporate social responsibility of business, it is not surprising to see a strong occurrence of marketing ethics courses that are designed around an examination of the ethical relationships between marketing and society. Our sample included a number of marketing ethics courses specifically titled "Marketing & Society." It should be noted, however, that the title "Marketing & Society" alone does not necessarily relate to a marketing *ethics* course. For example, we found equal numbers of courses where that title was used to describe introductory marketing or marketing survey courses rather than marketing ethics courses.

The society-focused social issues marketing ethics course examines how marketing knowledge and marketing decisions can directly and indirectly influence the greater society. Social criticisms of marketing are explored, and the nature and impacts of public policy and government regulation are analyzed. The societal implications of misleading and deceptive marketing practices are examined. Many issues that are addressed in the *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing* and the marketing section of the *Journal of Business Ethics* are appropriate for this course. The *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing* has published 64 articles in the past 5 years with an emphasis on social issues, versus 28 articles on consumer protection, 24 articles on the role of marketing in society, and 4 articles on sustainability topics. By broadly considering marketing's role in society through an ethical lens, this course helps emphasize how marketing can be used responsibly and ethically to minimize harm and maximize benefits to society on a global basis. Several of the society-oriented marketing ethics courses in our sample approached this objective from creative perspectives, including examinations of the bottom of the pyramid, working poor, and nonprofit issues and opportunities.

A marketing and society course, like a stakeholder course, usually addresses social responsibility more than ethical decision making. A marketing and society course is often taught from a consumer and societal viewpoint and with less of a managerial focus. A limitation is that there is a possibility of assuming that organizational ethics evolves out of just addressing important social issues. A managerial course would focus on internal organizational decision making related to ethical risks, ethics programs, codes of ethics, compliance, and more. An emphasis on individual moral philosophies and developing a personal lens would address the issues discussed in marketing and society from a personal perspective. Although students should develop a personal perspective, they should also be aware that in an entry-level marketing position, they will not be able to independently address major issues in society. A balanced business and society course could incorporate most of the different course perspectives we have covered and encourage students to understand how strategic decisions about societal issues are made in marketing.

Discussion

Our exploratory study finds that stand-alone marketing ethics courses are not very prevalent. Also, the meaning of the "marketing ethics course" is not very clear based on what is currently in use. Indeed, although we separated these marketing ethics courses into five categories, most are hybrids of some sort. In other words, none of the marketing ethics courses fit perfectly into one type. These hybrid approaches increase the complexity of marketing ethics education in institutions of higher learning. It is our belief that this low prevalence in marketing ethics courses at business schools combined with the wide variety of approaches in use results in weak overall traction in the adoption of marketing ethics courses in business education.

We believe that the marketing ethics course should be as important as many other elective courses that are taught for the marketing concentration. This course has the potential to enhance critical thinking and communication skills important in marketing decisions. Many ethical decisions occur in gray areas that will require knowledge, research, and

collaboration with others, requiring students to go beyond their own personal ethical lenses and values. If students do not learn about the ethical risks and types of issues they will face, then they will have more difficulty recognizing ethical issues and in understanding how to resolve ethical dilemmas. Because the field of marketing is a highly visible, boundary-spanning area, the firm's reputation rests as much on integrity as it does on technical knowledge about sales, advertising, pricing, and distribution. This course should be an integral part of marketing education.

The marketing ethics course can provide students with a practical understanding of the ethical challenges that they will face as new employees. Therefore, the use of examples, cases, and exercises that relate directly to their situation and the types of decisions they will face can be an excellent learning opportunity. Courses that focus on macromarketing issues such as social issues and sustainability strategies are helpful, but dealing with individual-level issues of potential relevance to new marketing employees such as conflicts of interest, expense accounts, time theft, abusive behavior, and bribery can be very beneficial. Students need to learn how to understand the meaning of an ethical culture and the values and professional standards of participating in the marketing profession.

There is a distinction between a business ethics course and a marketing ethics course. Although marketing ethics can be considered a subset of business ethics, marketing students need to learn to relate to what is unique and important in being successful in this area. A business ethics course often focuses on frameworks and issues that are much broader in scope and includes many issues beyond the scope of what most marketing managers deal with. A marketing ethics course, like accounting ethics courses and sustainability courses, addresses concepts, issues, and frameworks that relate to the risks, nature, and scope of a specific domain.

Whether to offer a marketing ethics course may depend on the existence of a core business ethics course (only 25% of U.S. business schools require such a course) and how ethics is being addressed in other functional courses. For example, if there is no required business ethics course, a marketing ethics course may be designed to fit with other courses in the market concentration.

Most important, faculty and students need to understand that marketing ethics is not as easy as just telling people to do the right thing. Ethical decision making in marketing can be difficult, and the consequences of unethical conduct can destroy a career as well as the reputation of the firm. Most marketing ethics activities have risks such as conflicts of interest, bribery, false and misleading communications, product quality, as well as pricing and supply chain ethics. On the other hand, all evidence points to the fact that good ethics is good business and results in outcomes that translate into high financial performance.

Limitations and Future Research

Exploratory studies can provide useful descriptive insights into the current status of the marketing ethics course, but like all exploratory studies, this study has limitations that open up avenues for future research. This study uses secondary data made available by professors and on university websites as the basis for exploring current practices in the stand-alone marketing ethics course. Future studies may want to use a more comprehensive survey to gain insights from marketing professors that have an interest in teaching marketing ethics. Trying to reveal why these professors do not offer the marketing ethics course may be as insightful as understanding the current status of existing courses. Additionally, these studies could more exhaustively examine *all* AACSB programs (or other globally recognized business school accreditations) to create a more comprehensive picture. The exploratory results indicate that looking at non-U.S. programs in particular could yield unique marketing ethics course configurations and emphases from which we can learn.

Following the lead of Rutherford et al. (2012), future research could also examine a variety of internal and external factors in the business school programs that do and do not have stand-alone marketing ethics courses. Are there situation-level or leadership-level variables that tend to lead to the incorporation of a marketing ethics course in a given business school curriculum? Finally, although this study identifies key characteristics of a variety of current practices, future investigations could compare the *effectiveness* of the different approaches to delivering a marketing ethics course. The marketing ethics course has not been well established as an elective course, and this study provides evidence that there are many different perspectives on the content for the course. More contributions to knowledge that define marketing ethics as a part of a marketing concentration could help determine the need and appropriate content for this course.

Conclusions

This exploratory study has provided solid evidence that only a limited number of universities offer a marketing ethics course. The marketing ethics course is defined across the entire spectrum of issues related to marketing ethics and social responsibility. In fact, most of the courses that were analyzed are more focused on the interface of marketing with society, social issues, stakeholders, and consumer protection issues. Most courses do not focus on managerial ethics issues that relate to internal management of marketing ethics decision making. For example, this approach would spend more time on identifying risk areas such as bribery, antitrust, misleading promotion, and more.

The approaches to the marketing ethics course that we discovered include the philosophy-focused marketing ethics

course, the managerial marketing ethics course, the cross-cultural marketing ethics course, the stakeholder-focused marketing ethics course, and the society-focused social issues marketing ethics course. It is important to note that these content areas appear to be the areas that are considered most appropriate for students to address in learning about marketing ethics. Nearly all the courses that we analyzed integrated some of these content areas into their courses. We simply identified the major focus of the course and attempted to derive an overarching perspective to the course. We feel that identifying these major content perspectives should be extremely helpful to anyone who wants to develop a marketing ethics course.

Based on our experience and the results of our analysis, we believe that a marketing ethics course has potential to significantly enhance the knowledge of students. Although ethics has not been a major functional area of marketing decisions such as sales, channel decisions, advertising, product management, and price management, it does relate to the necessary conduct involved in implementing these functions. It is important that students understand that marketing ethics is just not philanthropic activities, sustainability, and social responsibility. Although these are important topics, few companies engage in serious misconduct while trying to carry out these activities. On the other hand, marketing ethics and social responsibility are complementary concepts. Marketing ethics relates to decision making consistent with legal compliance, organizational policies, and stakeholder relationships. Social responsibility relates to evaluations about contributions to the economic and social common good of society. Ethics becomes important as it is embedded in daily decisions related directly to functional areas of decision making. Marketing managers must understand risks associated with misleading promotion such as deceptive advertising, bribery, price-fixing, defective products, as well as ethical issues and responsibilities in maintaining the integrity of the supply chain. These areas of concern require not just telling students to be ethical and obey the law but also ensuring that students gain knowledge and an appreciation of the complexity of these relationships. There is a need to develop competence in marketing concepts and application and understand how ethics is embedded in almost every marketing decision. A marketing ethics course can fill an important gap in this area.

To aid and encourage broader incorporation of a stand-alone marketing ethics course component within more business school programs, we have developed a sample marketing ethics course syllabus that can be accessed at danielsethics.mgt.unm.edu under Teaching Resources. This sample syllabus incorporates best practice content and integrates pedagogical elements from each of the five marketing ethics course categories. Curriculum developers can use this syllabus as a template for customization and implementation of their own tailored stand-alone marketing ethics course at either the undergraduate or graduate level.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

Abela, A. V., & Murphy, P. E. (2008). Marketing with integrity: Ethics and the service-dominant logic for marketing. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, *36*, 39-53.

Beggs, J. M. (2011). Seamless integration of ethics. *Marketing Education Review*, *21*(1), 49-56.

Beggs, J. M., & Dean, K. L. (2007). Legislated ethics or ethics education? Faculty views in the post-Enron era. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *71*, 15-37.

Brenkert, G. G. (2002). Ethical challenges of social marketing. *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, *21*(1), 14-25.

Brennan, R., Eagle, L., Ellis, N., & Higgins, M. (2010). Of a complex sensitivity in marketing ethics education. *Journal of Marketing Management*, *26*, 1165-1180.

Crittenden, V. L., & Crittenden, W. F. (2006). The undergraduate capstone marketing course: Objectives, content, and pedagogy. *Journal for Advancement of Marketing Education*, *8*, 79-88.

Crittenden, V. L., & Wilson, E. J. (2006). Content, pedagogy, and learning outcomes in the international marketing course. *Journal of Teaching in International Business*, *17*(1-2), 81-101.

Durand, R., & McGuire, J. (2005). Legitimating agencies in the face of selection: The case of AACSB. *Organization Studies*, *26*, 165-196.

Eisenhardt, K., & Graebner, M. (2007). Theory building from cases: Opportunities and challenges. *Academy of Management Journal*, *50*(1), 25-32.

Ferrell, O. C. (2007). Nature and scope of marketing ethics. In G. T. Gundlach, L. Block & W. Wilkie (Eds.), *Explorations of marketing in society* (pp. 858-875). Mason, OH: Thomson Higher Education.

Ferrell, O. C., Fraedrich, J., & Ferrell, L. (2013). *Business ethics: Ethical decision making and cases* (9th ed.). Mason, OH: South-Western.

Ferrell, O. C., Gonzalez-Padron, T. L., Hult, G. T. M., & Maignan, I. (2010). From market orientation to stakeholder orientation. *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, *29*(1), 93-96.

Ferrell, O. C., & Gresham, L. G. (1985). A contingency framework for understanding ethical decision making in marketing. *Journal of Marketing*, *49*(3), 87-96.

Ferrell, O. C., Gresham, L. G., & Fraedrich, J. (1989). A synthesis of ethical decision models for marketing. *Journal of Macromarketing*, *9*(2), 55-64.

Friedman, M. (1970). The social responsibility of business is to increase its profits. *New York Times Magazine*, pp. 32-33, 122, 124, 126.

Hartman, L. P., & Werhane, P. H. (2009). A modular approach to business ethics integration: At the intersection of the stand-alone and the integrated approaches. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *90*, 295-300.

Harvey, B., & Schaefer, A. (2001). Managing relationships with environmental stakeholders: A study of U.K. water and electricity utilities. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *30*, 243-260.

Hastings, G., Stead, M., & Webb, J. (2004). Fear appeals in social marketing: Strategic and ethical reasons for concern. *Psychology & Marketing*, *21*, 961-986.

Hult, G. T. M. (2011). Toward a theory of the boundary-spanning marketing organization and insights from 31 organization theories. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, *39*, 509-536.

Hunt, S., & Vitell, S. (1986). A general theory of marketing ethics. *Journal of Macromarketing*, *6*(1), 5-16.

Hunt, S., & Vitell, S. (2006). The general theory of marketing ethics: A revision and three questions. *Journal of Macromarketing*, *26*(2), 143-153.

Hunt, S. D. (1991). *Modern marketing theory: Critical issues in the philosophy of marketing science*. Cincinnati, OH: South-Western.

Klein, N. (2000). *No logo: Taking aim at the brand bullies*. London, England: Picador.

Kleiner, A. (1991). What does it mean to be green? *Harvard Business Review*, *69*(4), 38-47.

Loe, T. W., & Ferrell, L. (2001). Teaching marketing ethics in the 21st century. *Marketing Education Review*, *11*(2), 1-16.

Maignan, I., Ferrell, O. C., & Ferrell, L. (2005). A stakeholder model for implementing social responsibility in marketing. *European Journal of Marketing*, *39*, 956-977.

Maignan, I., Gonzalez-Padron, T. L., Hult, G. T. M., & Ferrell, O. C. (2011). Stakeholder orientation: Development and testing of a framework for socially responsible marketing. *Journal of Strategic Marketing*, *19*, 313-338.

McAlister, D. T. (2004). Building ethical capacity in business schools. *Marketing Education Review*, *14*(3), 55-62.

Murphy, P. E. (2002). Marketing ethics at the millennium: Review, reflections and recommendations. In N. E. Bowie (Ed.), *The Blackwell guide to business ethics* (pp. 165-185). Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Murphy, P. E. (2010). Business and marketing ethics: Good news and bad news. *Business Ethics Quarterly*, *20*, 751-753.

Murphy, P. E., Laczniak, G. R., Bowie, N. E., & Klein, T. A. (2005). *Ethical marketing*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice-Hall.

Murphy, P. E., Laczniak, G. R., & Prothero, A. (2012). *Ethics in marketing: International cases*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Nill, A., & Schibrowsky, J. A. (2007). Research on marketing ethics: A systematic review of the literature. *Journal of Macromarketing*, *27*, 256-273.

Petrick, J. A., Cragg, W., & Sanudo, M. (2011). Business ethics in North America: Trends and challenges. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *104*, 51-62.

Pollay, R. W. (1986). The distorted mirror: Reflections on the unintended consequences of advertising. *Journal of Marketing*, *50*(2), 18-36.

Porter, M. E., & Kramer, M. R. (2006). The link between competitive advantage and corporate social responsibility. *Harvard Business Review*, *84*(12), 78-92.

Ritter, B. A. (2006). Can business ethics be trained? A study of the ethical decision-making process in business students. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *68*, 153-164.

Rowley, J. (2002). Using case studies in research. *Management Research News*, *25*(1), 16-27.

Rutherford, M. A., Parks, L., Cavazos, D. E., & White, C. D. (2012). Business ethics as a required course: Investigating the factors impacting the decision to require ethics in the undergraduate business core curriculum. *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, *11*, 174-186.

Schlegelmilch, B. B. (1998). *Marketing ethics: An international perspective*. Boston, MA: International Thomson Business Press.

Schlegelmilch, B. B., & Öberseder, M. (2010). Half a century of marketing ethics: Shifting perspectives and emerging trends. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *93*, 1-19.

Sims, R. R., & Felton, E. L. (2006). Designing and delivering business ethics teaching and learning. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *63*, 297-312.

Thaler, R. H., & Sunstein, C. R. (2008). *Nudge: Improving decisions about health, wealth, and happiness*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Treviño, L. (1986). Ethical decision making in organizations: A person-situation interactionist model. *Academy of Management Review*, *11*, 601-617.

Wilke, W., & Moore, E. (1999). Marketing's contribution to society. *Journal of Marketing*, *63*, 198-218.

Wilkie, W. L., & Moore, E. S. (2012). Expanding our understanding of marketing in society. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, *40*, 53-73.

Yin, R. K. (2009). *Case study research: Design and methods* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.