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THE SENIOR MARKETING OFFICER -
AN ACADEMIC PERSPECTIVE

Working Paper 82-904*

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THE SENIOR MARKETING OFFICER - AN ACADEMIC PERSPECTIVE

ABSTRACT

This paper reports the summary observations and opinions associated with the performance of the senior managerial task and reassesses the marketing educator's responsibilities in light of the experience. The observations and opinions are based on a recently completed two year experience as Senior Vice President of Marketing for the Searle Optical Group (Pearle Vision Centers). Critical observations are made about the role of marketing in the firm, the most vital aspects of the job, the art-science debate, marketing and finance, working with people, dealing with inflation, and time pressures. These observations are then discussed in the context of the marketing educator's teaching, research and service responsibilities.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The Position:

The author recently completed two years of work as the Senior Vice President, Marketing and Merchandising for the Searle Optical Group, owner and operator of the nation's largest retailer of eyecare products and services (Pearle Vision Center). This position reported directly to the President as did the Senior Vice Presidents for Retail Operations, Manufacturing, Finance, Real Estate and International. These six Senior Vice Presidents plus the President formed the senior executive group responsible for strategic planning and operations review and assessment. The Senior Vice President - Marketing and Merchandising had responsibility for Marketing Research and Planning, Advertising, Frame Purchasing, Contact Lens Purchasing and In-Store Merchandising and Display.

The Industry:

The optical industry was characterized by traditional providers of eyecare products and services (independent Ophthalmologists, Optometrists and Opticians) operating as independent professionals until the early 1970's. At

that time the structure of the industry began to change drastically as new types of providers, chains of specialty optical stores, achieved success in the marketplace. This trend accelerated when the Federal Trade Commission ruled in 1978 that an individual patient must receive his or her eyeglass prescription from the examining Ophthalmologist or Optometrist. This so called "floating prescription" ruling and the concurrent relaxation of individual state originated prohibitions on advertising by professionals provided major impetus to the growth of specialty retail optical chains.

The Company:

The Searle Optical Group, one of three operating groups of the G. D. Searle Company, is the United States' largest and most successful specialty retailer of eyecare products and services with over 900 Pearle Vision Centers in forty states. Total sales for the Pearle Vision Centers for 1982 are expected to exceed \$250 million while operating profits are expected to exceed 12% of sales. Growth rates for sales and operating profits have exceeded 30% per year for the past several years. The typical Pearle Vision Center is located in either a major shopping mall or on a free-standing site across from or adjacent to a major shopping center. Store size ranges from 900 - 2,000 square feet. Store format includes attractive exteriors and interiors, fashionable display of frames, lenses, contact lenses and accessory products, an in-store laboratory with a sizeable inventory of frames and lenses, and an adjacent doctor's office with complete visual analysis equipment. Vertical integration of the chain features a well-stocked national distribution center for filling store refill or out of stock items and three laboratories to provide special lens work which cannot be completed with existing equipment or existing inventory at the individual Pearle Vision Center. The entire package

is designed to appeal to the customer seeking quality eyecare at affordable prices in convenient locations with long hours and quick, complete service.

The Objective of the Paper:

The experiences afforded by a two year stint as the Senior Marketing Officer of a dynamic, rapidly growing company in an industry characterized by rapid structural change were superb and clearly rewarding from a professional and personal perspective. However, I felt that the summary observations and opinions about the performance of the marketing task and a consequent reassessment of the marketing educator's responsibilities based on these experiences, should be of interest to both professor and manager, particularly since this type of experience is not typically available to the academic. The following key observations represent the distillation of a myriad of events, activities and decisions. In each case, I have tried to capture the flavor of the experience which is most difficult to appreciate unless it has been experienced. Unfortunately, the comments reflect only one company in one industry but I believe they will be stimulating and rewarding for the marketing professional.

KEY OBSERVATIONS

Marketing Within the Firm:

The marketing activities encompassed within the marketing function at the Searle Optical Group are without a doubt, very important, exciting, interesting, highly visible aspects of the enterprise. In many ways, the success of the enterprise depends on successful performance in these marketing areas. Consequently, each key functional area (Finance, Manufacturing, Real Estate, Operations) has a great deal of interest in the conduct of the marketing activities and tends to provide "expert" advice, counsel and commentary on a

fairly regular basis. Thus, marketing executives must balance openness and receptivity to ideas and comments with the time and resource requirements of ongoing marketing program management. The uncertainties of the marketplace coupled with keen interest of other functional areas make the marketing function a high risk task requiring substantial amounts of intra-firm selling as well as customer directed marketing efforts.

Vital Aspects of the Job:

The most important aspects of the marketing function at Searle Optical Group were fundamental in nature. Understanding customers is the critical first step. This means who they are, where they purchase, why they purchase where they do, why they don't purchase at other places, satisfaction and dissatisfaction levels and sources of each, and the like. Understanding buyer behavior is the prerequisite for development of successful marketing programs.

Understanding competition and relative success rates is a necessary second step for development of successful marketing programs. Each type of competitor must be profiled and examined carefully in an effort to understand the products and services being provided and the basic positioning of each type of competitor.

The third step requires conceptualization of the marketing program based on the understanding acquired about buyers and competition and an assessment of available resources. This conceptualization is effectively modeled by the "marketing mix" literature. The purpose is to build a program which covers all controllable elements (products, services, prices, advertising, promotion, location, distribution, etc.) but emphasizes the distinctive attributes deemed most important by customers and not now properly assembled and/or available in the marketplace. For Pearle Vision Center, this means quality eyewear and

professional services at affordable prices in convenient locations with quick, friendly, competent help.

Delivering the program to the marketplace becomes the fourth vital step. The customer must receive the substance and the perception of the attributes of the marketing program developed earlier. Delivery of the perception can be difficult but is as important as the substance. Consequently the program must be viewed through the eyes of your customers, prospective customers, dissatisfied customers, competitors, disgruntled suppliers, and others as well as normal communication channels to better understand the true delivery to the marketplace.

Measuring, monitoring and adjusting the marketing program becomes the fifth vital aspect of the job. Sales, traffic, telephone inquiries, expenditures, complaints, problems and the like provide ample but often contradictory signals. Distinguishing aberrations from early trends is the hallmark of the successful manager in this area.

Finally, as each of the vital aspects described above is continually developing and evolving, new strategic opportunities for growth and development must be identified, evaluated and tested. This requirement is a very difficult but extremely important aspect of the marketing task given the typical competitive saturation of a product, service, or retail concept. Dedication of ample time to this dimension of the task seems very difficult at any point in time but it is an absolutely critical task.

Art vs. Science:

The practice of marketing in the Searle Optical Group is clearly much more of an art than a science. Important marketing decisions dealing with selection of advertising messages, media weights, mixes and schedules, frame colors, styles, and price points, in-store sign composition and promotional

messages and the like, require experience, judgement, intuition, and good timing even within the context of extensive research and testing. Explicit decision rules and norms are neither available nor appropriate. The scientific element in the practice of marketing tends to be more of the marketing management intellectual process to guide the manager and the methodological procedures available for diagnostic and evaluative research and testing activities.

Marketing and Finance:

Publicly owned corporations are forced to focus a great deal of their efforts on short-term financial performance which typically means quarter to quarter sales and earnings and rate of growth of sales and earnings. This orientation can be overdone. If it becomes excessive, it can affect longer term performance of the firm and also directly affect the marketing activity via budget reduction in marketing investment areas, particularly advertising and marketing research and planning expenditures. Marketing executives need to upgrade their capabilities in the financial area and be more prepared to evaluate the financial consequences of their current and proposed activities. However, lack of explicit understanding of cause-effect relationships in the marketing expenditures area makes sophisticated financial analysis less useful because the revenue and related marketing expenditures relationships are very difficult to determine and if determined are not particularly stable. Often financial analysts do not understand or appreciate the implications of their assumptions about revenues, prices, and marketing expenditures. In essence, while marketing executives increase their financial acumen, they must also continue to focus their efforts on the components of the so called "top line" or revenue. There is very little opportunity for satisfactory "bottom lines" if the "top lines" are not adequate. Marketing professionals should not forget this point.

Working With People:

Virtually every aspect of the marketing job requires work being done by, with, and through people who are superiors, subordinates, parallel managers, and/or associated with suppliers. The marketing tasks will not be accomplished successfully if any of the people involved do not understand the requirements of their tasks and are not properly motivated to perform their tasks. The best research and planning efforts will suffer from an inability or unwillingness on the part of the people to deliver to the customer the substance and the perception of the attributes of the marketing program. Marketing programs must be explained and sold to the people who will deliver the program as well as to the obvious target, the prospective customer. Consequently, inadequate or insensitive interpersonal skills will be a major flaw in the composition of a successful marketing executive.

Dealing With Inflation:

The rate of inflation experienced during the late 1970's and early 1980's has had an insidious effect on marketing programs. Cost pressures force price increases which affect buyer perceptions and behavior. Multiple household incomes combat inflation but drastically alter shopping patterns and behavior. Location and occupancy cost increases modify financial return and suggest alternative distribution systems. Television audiences shift dramatically while costs per network rating point increase at rates substantially in excess of inflation requiring media mix and schedule adjustments and so forth. Dealing with this uncontrollable issue in an intelligent, creative manner is one of the most challenging tasks of the marketing executive. Unfortunately, however, this issue has not been well understood. It clearly deserves more attention.

Time Pressures:

Significant time pressures appear to be the norm rather than the exception for the marketing executive. Although these pressures can and should be alleviated in part by proper planning, anticipation, and organization, these pressures will remain to a considerable degree. Consequently, many decisions, some very important, will have to be made with modest or little substantive information. Rapid assessment and evaluation skills are highly desirable characteristics for the marketing executive. This also suggests the need for significant levels of tolerance for an imperfect world in which one attempts to make the best decisions possible, observes results, and improves the situation at the next appropriate interval, based on what has been learned. The world of the marketing executive is much more of an iterative world than a maximum-optimum, search for perfect information world.

THE MARKETING EDUCATOR'S RESPONSIBILITIES - A REASSESSMENT

General Observations:

Marketing educators should rededicate their interest in the basics of the marketing management process. Failure to adequately focus on the basic process-customer understanding, competitive and environmental assessment, program development, delivery, evaluation and adjustment, may be more of a problem to the profession than is realized. Many less than successful marketing efforts observed can be traced to a flaw or failure in the basic process. Some of these problems could not have been prevented, given the time constraints or other pressures. However, the profession will benefit from re-emphasis of the basic marketing management intellectual process.

The marketing educator needs to dedicate more resources to the problems associated with the delivery and implementation of marketing programs.

Educators and managers have tended to ignore or at least neglect this aspect of marketing management but it is absolutely critical and needs much more attention. This means that a lot more effort in the areas of understanding and motivating people within the context of the marketing function will be required.

Marketing executives and marketing educators need to improve their understanding of financial analysis and language and integrate into their marketing efforts a much more comprehensive, advanced financial analysis capability. At the same time, they need to become much more critical of the assumed marketing expenditure - revenue-price relationships apparent in much financial analysis. This is a major opportunity area for marketing professionals.

Marketing educators need to understand and accept that the practice of marketing management is substantially art rather than science. Conceptual and empirical contributions to the practice of marketing management have been and should be made but marketing management must be recognized as, in the main, a process which relies heavily on experience, intelligence, intuition, and good timing. Representation of the task in another manner is not appropriate.

Corporate executives have tremendous pressures placed on them from a variety of internal and external sources. When these pressures are managed properly, the corporate executive has an unusual opportunity to grow and adapt to a changing environment. The marketing educator, particularly at the senior levels, has the luxury of self-motivation to achieve growth and to adapt to a changing environment. However, each marketing educator has a responsibility to apply enough pressure to stimulate the necessary professional growth and development. This is a responsibility that must not be overlooked.

Teaching Related Observations: Variety of Methods

Marketing educators need to be sure that a wide variety of pedagogical techniques is employed to properly stimulate and develop the critical conceptual, creative, communicative, analytical and interpersonal skills of the student. Development of these skills will clearly supplement the basic functional content associated with each marketing course and enhance the potential of the student.

Research Related Observations: Real World Focus

The marketing educator conducting research has a professional responsibility to focus the research on the meaningful, complex, real world problems faced by firms, industries, regulatory bodies, and their managers. This orientation requires thoughtful response to the oft posed question about published academic marketing research efforts - So what? This orientation requires an avoidance of sophistication and technique orientation for the sake of sophistication and technique. It raises questions about the appropriateness of research utilizing student subjects when firms and executives of firms seriously seek on a continuous basis information, analysis of information, and interpretation of situations to help them cope with the uncertainties of their environment and to help them make better decisions. The academic research opportunities in the marketing field as defined above are enormous and should be vigorously pursued.

Service Related Observations: Become Involved with Professional Counterparts

The marketing educator has a professional responsibility to develop and maintain a close, working, objective relationship with his or her counterparts in the non-academic world. These relationships will form the basis for the long term development and advancement of the profession while enhancing the

productivity and personal satisfaction associated with the performance of academic and managerial tasks.

Conclusions:

In summary, it is the marketing educator's responsibility to anticipate, identify and examine the kinds of problems and opportunities the fledgling and the experienced marketing executive is likely to face and provide this same marketing executive with an intellectual process and an analytical capability to respond to these challenges in a creative, effective manner. In the ideal situation, the marketing educator will play the dual role of leader-partner with his fledgling and experienced manager counterpart in the development and advancement of the practice and process of marketing management. Each of us should examine his professional behavior to see if he can improve his performance.

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