

An Assessment of The Proposed Academy of Marketing Science Code of Ethics for Marketing Educators

O. C. Ferrell

ABSTRACT. The development of a professional code of ethics should provide an explanation of the professional values and principals that guide a body of persons engaged in an important role in society. Most professions find ethical standards of conduct are necessary to codify acceptable behavior to develop public trust, reliability, and consistency in their performance. The proposed AMS Code of Ethics for Marketing Educators is the first step in developing communication, debate, and hopefully, agreement about the social responsibility of the marketing discipline. It is important to note that the AMS code was not developed to punish wrongdoers but to provide a positive guide to help marketing educators understand how their actions may be viewed by society. It is an attempt to establish standards that are collectively viewed as important to the marketing education profession.

An assessment should try to judge the value or character of a work product. The purpose of this paper is to evaluate a discussion document that provides a code of ethics for marketing educators

at colleges and universities throughout the world. The discussion document describes the process of development and the outcome, including concerns about social responsibility and ethical prescriptions for behavior. The development of an agreement on the social responsibilities of marketing educators is challenging and requires the viewpoints of many interested parties. The purpose of this paper is to first examine the role of codes of ethics in professional development, then to assess the code of ethics that has been developed on behalf of the AMS Board of Governors for marketing educators.

The establishment of a professional code of ethics

Professions that require extensive education, including a body of persons engaged in an important role in society, should have standards of conduct. The process of becoming a professional involves learning how to perform activities or a function important to society. Therefore, professionals are differentiated from others in the workplace because of their competency and obligations to respect public trust. The academic marketing profession qualifies as an important profession engaged in teaching, research and service that benefits society. Without their own code of ethics, marketing educators cannot attain standardization of professional behavior that provides competency in ethical performance for members of the profession and its various constituencies. Marketing educators need directions in ethical decision making because one's personal

O. C. Ferrell is a Distinguished Professor of Marketing and Business Ethics at The University of Memphis. He has published over 25 articles on business ethics topics and is the co-author of Integrity Management: A Guide to Managing Legal and Ethical Issues in the Workplace, Business Ethics: Text and Cases, and In Pursuit of Ethics: Tough Choices in the World of Work. Dr. Ferrell chaired the committee that developed the American Marketing Association Code of Ethics, as well as the American Marketing Association Code of Ethics for the Internet. He has served as an expert witness in business ethics related litigation.

moral philosophy is only one factor that influences complex decisions about potential ethical and legal situations in higher education.

Because marketing professionals come from different cultures and backgrounds and have different moral philosophies, they are likely to have difficulty determining what behavior is professionally acceptable without uniform policies and standards. Codes of conduct are formal statements of what behaviors are acceptable or improper. While individuals can accept, reject or modify the codes for their situation, codes provide general guidelines that can assist decision making. Professions such as law, medicine, engineering and accounting have found it necessary to codify acceptable behavior to develop public trust, reliability and consistency in services.

A professional code of ethics must address specific high-risk activities within the scope of daily operations of the professionals' work or activities. The development of a code of ethics should involve the profession's most respected leaders and should provide opportunities from input from all levels. Developing a code of ethics without a widespread "buy-in" for the standards will result in failure. Usually it is important to involve the services of legal counsel to insure the code has correctly assessed key areas of risk and that potential legal problems are buffered by standards in the code. In addition, the code should not restrict personal freedoms or the right of self-expression protected by laws.

The most important role of a code is to explain the underlying professional values and principles. These values should define the culture that professionals must establish in their organizations and the overall tone for organizational decisions. Although values may sometimes sound esoteric, they are usually derived from standard accepted practice as well as the vision and aspirations important for guiding and implementing specific behaviors. These values should be explained in the code with examples of how professionals can implement the vision.

Ideally, a code of ethics should educate professionals so that they understand that ethics and the law follow a continuum, and that the law is predicated upon standards and expectations of society, and not vice versa. Making this distinc-

tion will give everyone a better understanding of why it is important to make ethical standards the norm in order to buffer legal issues. For example, issues related to sexual harassment and conflict of interest can both lead to offenses that have legal ramifications. The code should explain why "ethical" behavior that exceeds the minimum legal requirement in these areas is important and necessary to professional success. The professional should always be given discretion to interpret situations and remain flexible in the implementation of specific directions in codes. Often the policies of an organization and/or the legal constraints of the local, state or national level may require adjustment of a code requirement.

Many critics of professional codes of ethics confuse personal morals and professional ethics. For example, our parents' lectures on fairness did not include an instruction on how to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act. Many professional ethical decisions are close calls. It often takes years of experience or training to know what is acceptable in an organizational environment. The teaching of general virtues such as truthfulness, honesty and the avoidance of harm are so general that they lend themselves to various interpretations. While these abstract virtues may be assumed as providing self-evident guidance for marketing professionals, cultural diversity and different perceptions of right and wrong will create ethical conflict. By establishing professional codes of ethics, it is possible to improve ethical decision-making by identifying ethical issues and recognizing the approaches available to resolve them. Diversity in thought and personal values must be respected, but a collective agreement on professional standards of acceptable behaviors is as vital as other aspects of being a professional. Many marketing educators have faced civil litigation involving their employer or students because of conflict over basic principles of right or wrong in a specific situation. The proposed AMS Code of Ethics for Marketing Educators will now be assessed more specifically to evaluate its contribution to standardizing ethical responsibilities.

An evaluation of the proposed AMS Code of Ethics for marketing educators

The most respected members of the professional should provide leadership in establishing a code of ethics that provides for the social responsibility of the profession. The two most respected professional associations for marketing educators are the American Marketing Association and the Academy of Marketing Science. The American Marketing Association has a Code of Ethics for Marketing Practitioners and a Code of Ethics for Marketing on the Internet. While the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) provides general ethical guidance for academics, it does not include marketing educators serving as business consultants or issues related to marketing research that bridge academe with industry. A strong case can be made that the Academy of Marketing Science is a leading professional organization for marketing educators that is uniquely suited to construct a professional code of ethics.

There has been a logical development of the code that provides a solid foundation for its continuous improvement. First, principal uses, purposes and stakeholders of the code were identified. Marketing educators, their universities and the various constituencies including students, businesses and society at large have been considered. The identification of ethical "themes" and higher order constructs as a direct function of the feedback provided by AMS members and from inspecting code of ethics documents of other professional and academic associations was used to capture obligations of marketing educators in relation to key stakeholders.

The development of a "statement of core values" provides a summary statement of the entire code of ethics that reflects duties as ethical responsibilities from the vantage point of the marketing faculty. Areas of concern were identified such as conflict of interest, intellectual honesty, professionalism and objectivity. It also included institutional structures and policies related to mentoring and volunteerism benefiting the collective and academic freedom and tenure.

Feedback provided from board members,

senior marketing scholars and marketing scholars who are specialists in ethics helped focus the code so that it is relevant, credible and concise. While the code provides a blueprint for acceptable behavior, it recognizes the impossible task of solving every ethical dilemma. The code addresses the most common concerns that a professional will face in a variety of situations, from internal organizational practices to social responsibilities to the public. The code confronts specific high-risk activities within the scope of daily operations that can result in unethical behavior and misconduct that could create legal ramifications.

The potential usefulness of the AMS Code of Ethics for marketing educators

The AMS Code of Ethics cannot be based on specific philosophical frameworks or moral philosophies. It could be based on best practices and the results of surveys that identify acceptable conduct. In other words, professional code development should reflect acceptable practice and not attempt to reinvent ethical behavior. The code should be dynamic and reflect change in values and societal concerns. My assessment of the code indicates that these basic procedures of code development have been followed in most cases, and that the current code reflects a systematic and thoughtful approach to development a code of ethics. The development of the code has been enhanced by the work of a number of academics who have conducted empirical research to determine perceived ethical issues in marketing education. The use of other associations' professional ethics standards in the academic area helped refine the issues and put them in a format that standardizes responsibilities in a teaching, research, service and administration environment. One of the most important outcomes of this exercise is the potential to sensitize current and would-be marketing educators to proper ethical conduct in academe and enable them to facilitate recognition of ethical improprieties. I have conducted research that has shown the existence and enforcement of codes of ethics were associated with high levels of

ethical behavior. Today, more than 80% of large companies have codes of conduct and over one-third of major U.S. companies have a full-time ethics officer, and these numbers are increasing daily. All professionals are facing scrutiny in the media, law suits, consumer complaints and general distrust and dissatisfaction. As stated earlier, a code of ethics is a distinguishing factor of professionals and knowing one's ethical responsibilities will enable that individual to exert appropriate restraint and pursue commonly accepted goals in the exercise of professional activities in terms of teaching, research, service and administration. To this end the AMS Code of Ethics will provide direction, support and defense of appropriate conduct.

The level of detail and specific examples associated with this code of ethics will provide the opportunity for marketing educators to address ethical conflict and possibly solve ethical problems. It will also create debate, discussion and complaints that the specifics do not apply to certain situations. The code should never be viewed as rules that must be applied in every situation. Many marketing educators make ethical mistakes because they fail to understand how their actions will be viewed by administrators, peers and students. The code was not developed to enforce and punish wrongdoers but to guide and direct decision makers. Marketing professors gain significant power over others and a great deal of discretion in their time and daily activities. If this power is used appropriately, it provides an important benefit to society and properly educates students to the betterment of our society. We should reach agreement that marketing educators have ethical obligations to our students, our colleagues, our universities, and to business and society. We need to continually evaluate the standards that we collectively view as important to our profession. The AMS proposed Code of Ethics should be subjected to further discussion and debate, but it appears to be a document that with continuous improvement can aid marketing educators' professionalism. In some cases it may be too specific or

makes assumptions that all educational institutions have the same mission. I believe the distribution of the current document among marketing educating educators and doctoral students will encourage debate and discussion that will provide improvement. More, special sessions and workshops at national and regional conferences will benefit the continuous development. Because there may be personal value judgments in some of the examples, i.e. consulting, the current code may need to become more general to apply in diverse educational cultures.

A final note of caution concerning the development of a professional code of ethics for marketing educators. Because many individuals fear that a code of ethics will become a template to overly scrutinize the actions of others, they reject the idea of a code that addresses specific issues. If the code is used for continuous self-improvement and to resolve ethical debates and conflicts, it will serve a worthwhile purpose. If the code is used to narrowly interpret and critique other people's actions for political purpose, it would be a major misuse of the professional development process. It is always difficult to get professional members to "buy in" or accept a code for these reasons. The most successful code development occurs when committees are empowered to develop codes and the board of directors provides approval. The Code of Conduct document provided by the Academy of Marketing Science has been designed for individuals in their own personal development, not as rules to be enforced in an organizational context. Educational institutions and the legal system will establish the final enforceable policy requirements. If marketing educators are truly committed to professionalism, they will debate and discuss this document to improve the social responsibility of the marketing discipline.

*Fogelmon College of Business and Economics,
The University of Memphis,
Memphis, Tennessee 38152,
U.S.A.*