

## **Developing Marketing Skills**

To be an effective manager within the marketing function, you will need to develop a number of skills. For marketing, decision-making, communicational, analytical and team working skills are vital. Each of these skills is now discussed. The need for the skill in marketing is explained; how to carry the skill out is discussed; and advice regarding how to develop the skill is given. These skills will be useful to you on your course. For example, decision-making and analytical skills are invaluable for case study work. Communicational skills will help you make better presentations and more effectively gather information. Finally, team working skills will help you work better in groups.

### **1. Decision-Making Skills**

The more senior individuals become within an organisation, the more impact their decisions will have and therefore, the more important it is that the correct decision is made. Often, however, it is extremely difficult to identify what the “correct” decision is, or even if one exists, because of the complex environment within which organisations function. As a result, some managers indulge in ‘satisficing’ – i.e. settling for a reasonable solution, rather than trying to identify the optimal solution which may involve seeking every relevant piece of information in order to make the best possible solution.

#### ***The Need for Skilled Decision-Making***

Marketing, like any business function and maybe more than other functions, requires good decision making skills. Marketers should decide which customers they are serving, how to take account of customer decision-making behaviour (chapters 2 and 8) and of course what pricing strategy to adopt (chapter 12). It is also important to identify how organisational decision-making takes place (chapter 5) in order to work well in the business to business market, be able to make good decisions regarding market research methodologies (chapter 7), recognise the impact of good decision making on brand management (chapter 9) and be able to manage decision making processes in order to facilitate innovation (chapter 11). So, it is fairly clear that decisions made by managers can have a vast impact on the success of any marketing project.

#### ***How to do it***

Decision making can take a number of forms: 1) The Rational Style, as detailed below; 2) Intuitive – making decisions through hunches; 3) Dependant – decision making carried out using advice from other people; 4) Avoidant – trying to avoid making any kind of decision; and 5) Spontaneous – making quick or ‘snap’ decisions. There are those who take an overall view of the options – e.g. “it’s got more benefits than the alternatives” and make a generalised decision.

Some of these are more difficult to explain than others, and some are more suitable for certain situations than others. The intuitive approach, for example, is most suitable for situations where a decision has not been made in such circumstances previously, where alternative solutions are unclear, where there is no or little experience from which to draw and/or where time is extremely limited. The rational approach, however, is much better for a common problem which has been experienced many times previously (i.e. there might be a well laid out procedure) and where alternatives can be clearly compared to each other.

The rational approach can be broken into a number of steps (the exact number varies from one model to another): examples below relate to a typical marketing decision regarding the evaluation of an advertising strategy.

- 1) Identifying your specific objective – what do you need/want to achieve? e.g. ensuring that the views of at least 1000 men and 1000 women are collected and analysed within a 5 week period over the summer, during the implementation of the strategy.
- 2) Identify the criteria for choosing an alternative – including ethical, legal and corporate policy issues. A good way of doing so is to phrase this as a statement: “Whichever method of evaluation is accepted must... *produce credible information for the senior management team and eliminate the influence of any external factors.*” For an evaluation of an advertising strategy, an example might be *‘Whichever alternative is selected must be able to differentiate between the effects of different forms of promotion, be within a £5000 budget. It should also be feasible within the 5 weeks period, should not create any inconvenience to respondents and must not use any unethical or illegal methods’.*

It is important to identify which criteria are essential (e.g. must cost less than £5000, distinguish between impact of advertising strategy and external factors), which are ‘desirables’ (be feasible within the 5 week period), and which are ‘undesirable’, and which criteria, if present, would disqualify an alternative (e.g. would involve illegal activities).

- 3) Generate/identify the options – being creative to generate the possibilities. This can include brainstorming, examining what is done elsewhere within the organisation, drawing parallels from what is done elsewhere and drawing ideas from past experiences. For our example, we might choose to consider evaluating our advertising strategy through the use of depth interviews, questionnaires, focus groups, a random mailshot and so on.
- 4) Evaluating the options against the criteria – the rational approach to decision making involves quantifying the options against the criteria. Our example might produce a grid something like the one below (weighting score on the options is on a scale 1-10, where 10 is very good and 1 is very poor; figures in brackets are the scores multiplied by weightings, to give a weighted score):

Criterion	Weighting (1 = not important; 10 = highly important)	Option 1: Interviews (out of 10)	Option 2: Questionnaire	Option 3: Focus Groups	Option 4: Random Mailshot
Able to differentiate between impact of advertising and other external factors	8	5 <b>(40)</b>	3 <b>(24)</b>	7 <b>(56)</b>	2 <b>(16)</b>
Feasible within 5 week period	6	3 <b>(18)</b>	4 <b>(24)</b>	2 <b>(12)</b>	1 <b>(6)</b>

Not create inconvenience	7	5 (35)	7 (49)	2 (14)	7 (49)
Does not use unethical / illegal methods	10	9 (90)	9 (90)	9 (90)	9 (90)
<b>Cumulative scores:</b>		<b>183</b>	<b>188</b>	<b>182</b>	<b>161</b>

From the very basic example above, we can see that under a rational approach to decision making, the best option (highest cumulative score) would seem to be the questionnaire and the worst (lowest cumulative score) would be the random mailshot.

Another way of looking at decision making has been developed by Vroom and Yetton – their research proposed a framework based on who was getting involved in the decision making process (the individual responsible and other interested parties) as well as the way in which their involvement takes place (as a group or as individuals). The framework included 5 approaches:

- 1) Individual makes decision alone with intuition. (A1)
- 2) Individual makes decision alone with extra data (A11)
- 3) Individual makes decision by consulting on a one-on-one basis (C1)
- 4) Individual makes decision by consulting on a group basis (C11)
- 5) Individual delegates responsibility to a stakeholder group (G11)

Under this framework, there is no definitive right or wrong way of making a decision: a great deal with depend on the importance of consulting others about the decision (high = C1 or C11, low = A1 or A11), the risk of conflict within the group of those affected (high = use of C1, low = C11), the time available for making the decision (short = A1 or C11) and the importance of being directly involved in making the decision (low = G11), rather than delegating it to others.

It is always important to reflect on the decisions we have made and see if the decision achieved the objectives set. If not, we need to consider whether there is anything to be learnt from the way we went about the process.

### ***Developing Decision-Making Skills***

1. Think about the last time you had to make an important decision. Which approach (intuitive, rational, etc.) did you use? Thinking about the framework (A1, A11, etc.), which was used? Did you make the decision in the best way possible? If you were able to define any objectives for the decision, did your decision making skills achieve those objectives?
2. If you were needing to decide upon a market research strategy, how might you go about doing so? Would it differ from a decision you might make about the process for the development of a new product?
3. If you are in part-time work, watch (or ask) how your managers make their decisions. Do they make all their decisions in the same way?

## **2. Communicational Skills**

When asked which communication skills are important in a job (see page 50), the answer will depend on the nature of the marketing role being undertaken, but the most commonly referred to communication skills generally fall into two categories: those which can be defined by their nature – questioning, giving information (speaking and writing) and receiving information (listening and reading); and those which have a functional purpose – e.g. suggesting, negotiating, persuading, interviewing – all of which will use the three former skills in different ways.

### ***The Need for Communication Skills***

Communication plays an important role in the marketing function, both at the individual (between individuals within the business) and the organisational (from the organisation to the consumer) levels. The text refers to the need to listen to the customer (p18), to communicate marketing plans to those charged with implementation and the need for all involved in planning to be able to use the same terminology (p.60), chapter 5 discusses the role of relationship marketing of which communication is a key part and, of course, building a successful brand involves the development and communication of a coherent message (pp.341-342).

Chapter 7 gives a number of important applications of communication skills. The skills of interviewing can be critical to the collection of qualitative and quantitative information on which marketing plans are based (p.243, pp.248-9 and pp.249-50), and the quality of any writing communication can impact on both internal and external processes.

Finally, the presentation of written communication (p. 258) is a key skill, especially in presenting a brief to a marketing agency or presenting market information to decision makers in organisations. The skills involved in decision making require that many decisions are based on accurate information and gathering that information directly from consumers cannot be done without good communication skills. The most obvious general application of communication skills relates to working with others – either as a team member or leader.

### ***How to do it***

Developing communication skills generally requires opportunities to demonstrate your communication skills, some personal evaluation of their effectiveness and some skill development planning for future occasions: it is not really reasonable to assume that by reading this, you will become an excellent communicator, but there are some useful issues and principles to consider.

### **Skills**

*Rapport Skills* – enabling the other party to feel relaxed in your presence and is done by establishing a common frame of reference with the other individual. This means copying their body language, using the same words and technical terms and copying their paralinguistic cues – tone, speed and volume of speech. Early in conversations, you will need to be observant to see what they do. Copying them may seem awkward, but it will become natural after a while.

*Listening* – different from *hearing* in that listening involves an understanding of the message being given. Such an understanding is developed through observing and interpreting visual and non-verbal signals in the manner that the sender intended.

Usually, listening – somewhat paradoxically – involves the use of questions, though obviously not to excess. Once information has been gathered, a good listener will check their understanding by giving a summary of the message as they see it and making sure that their summary accurately reflects the message given by the speaker – i.e. using a *reflective question*.

*Questioning* – Usually referred to as ‘the funnel process’ when interviewing. Open questions – “*tell me about the latest advertising campaign you have seen.*” – gather large amount of information; Probing questions – “*How did you feel when you used that product?*” – allow an interviewer to follow up on particular issues of interest; and closed questions – “*And what kind of price would you be willing to pay for product XXX?*” – give factual information. Interview schedules and questionnaires can include questions which ask respondents to rank, rate, indicate the best answer (multiple choice) and give their open view (open questions). The use of such questions will depend on the extent to which the analysis will involve complex statistical processes and the purpose(s) of the research.

There are other forms of questioning which are less appropriate when seeking to gather accurate information but which might be helpful when working with and leading others within an organisation. Leading questions – those which imply a correct answer (e.g. “Don’t you think it would seem bizarre to implement that marketing plan?”). Multiple questions (e.g. How do you think we should do this? Should the finance be raised first? And what do you think about their marketing plan? Would Bill approve it?) should be used as rarely as possible.

*Presenting Information* – Usually seen as (but not necessarily) the most nerve wracking form of communication. Use of intonation, hand and face gestures and a clear voice are all important, but equally, so are the need for a clear message, succinctly given and a clear structure (introduction, middle, conclusion). The latter should apply to written communication as well.

### ***Developing Communication Skills***

1. Watch a TV soap opera episode involving a difficult situation which requires delicate communication. If you were in the same situation, what would you say to others involved to resolve the situation? What assumptions did the characters make about the other individuals? Were they all correct? How did they affect the way they communicated with the other characters?
2. Think of a presentation you need to do in the not too distant future. Once you have prepared any audio-visual slides, practice the presentation in front of a friend, if possible. Ask them what they thought the key message you were trying to convey was, and for any issues you might need to change, in terms of both content and style
3. Imagine you are undertaking an important piece of marketing research. What do you need to find out? What questions – ranking, multiple choice, rating, open questions – would you need to ask to find the information needed?
4. Go to a local pub with a friend. Take a moment to watch others in the pub. Which groups/individuals seem to have the best rapport with each other? What do they do to lead you to that conclusion?

### 3. Analytical Skills

When we talk about analytical skills, we are discussing an area of mental ability seen more in its results than in the activity itself. Analytical abilities typically reveal themselves in reports, discussions at marketing meetings and when decisions are required. Effectively, we are referring to the ability to understand and interpret information of various kinds (e.g. statistical, behavioural, emotional), and that ability is critical in what we do daily – whether studying on an academic marketing course, developing marketing plans from information we have been given or managing others.

#### ***The Need for Analytical Skills***

Although much marketing can seem to the outsider a glamorous activity, resulting in glossy adverts in brochures and memorable TV advertisements, decisions regarding all aspects of marketing require significant analytical skills. It is important for identifying and understanding what is happening in the external environment (chapters 3, 7 and especially 19), for planning decisions (Chapter 2), for understanding the buying behaviour of those making purchasing decisions (chapters 4 and 5) and the development of new products (chapter 11), and finally, for ensuring that ethics and corporate responsibility are not compromised (chapter 6). Even the development of research methods for gathering such information requires some analytical ability to identify which methods might be appropriate. In fact, there is not a chapter here of this text that does not note the need for analysis of some kind in developing and initiating marketing strategies and plans.

#### ***How to do it***

Before we answer this question, it is vital to understand that any analysis is only ever going to be as useful as the information being analysed: get that wrong, and we can have all the analytical skills we want but we will still reach the wrong decision.

So, how do we analyse information? There are a number of levels to this issue, as inferred in the sentence above, and they can be addressed through asking a number of important questions:

- 1) Evaluation of the information – How good is this information? What information is missing? How was it gathered? What does it *really* tell us? Have the authors of 'the report' taken time to disprove the opposite of their conclusions, or is this information rather one-sided? (e.g. developing a marketing strategy: the information tells us which consumers buy our product, but omits to tell us which consumers do not... Or considering carefully whether to address formally a comment about an employee which was passed on as 'gossip', and doing so before gathering information seeking to disprove the gossip)
- 2) Interpretation of the information – Looking at the detail, are there any specific trends or themes? Any exceptions to "the general rule"? (e.g. a group of consumers who appear to be much more consistent in their buying behaviour than the norm... or a trend in some product development activities in the business environment to become more design/fashion aware, than concentrating on practical benefits)
- 3) Understanding of the information – this addresses the question of *why* things are the way they are: why are these products 'behaving' in the market place in the way that they do? Are things going to be continuing in this way, or is this a short term trend? (e.g. why are some consumers more fashion

conscious than practical in their buying behaviour? Is it about personality? Peer pressure? Or are there other wider forces at work?)

Decisions about what to do next and how to use this information are always going to be based on intuition as well as a more rational approach. There is more on this topic within the decision making area of this website.

### ***Developing Analytical Skills***

1. Take a broadsheet newspaper and a tabloid newspaper that roughly covers the same material. Together with some others, examine one of the key stories outlined there. How thoroughly was the information gathered – is it speculation, or are there facts and figures given there? Is there any evidence (from your own thinking or from the information in the stories) that the reporters have come to a balanced view, or have they simply given information supporting their ideas?
2. Using some information on social trends available online (e.g. [www.statistics.gov.uk](http://www.statistics.gov.uk)), what does the information show? Is it easy to determine long term trends? Does it show any exceptions to “the rule”? Could there be any such exceptions?
3. Using the population information available from the above website, what might the implications be for trying to promote different kinds of product – e.g. lawnmower, fashion accessories, or a family hatchback car?
4. Thinking about your own buying behaviour, why do you buy the items you buy – food, transport, clothes? Given the amount of information that retailers and supermarkets have at their disposal, would they be likely to understand why you buy certain items rather than others?

#### **4. Team working**

Working in a team forms a significant part of the work for any individual involved in marketing, but as chapter 2 indicates (see section on 'Problems in Making Planning Work'), working in a team is not always easy. Definitions of teams vary and some (e.g. Muchinsky, 1997) don't really perceive a significant difference between groups and teams, but most individuals consider teams to be more focussed and goal driven than groups: the latter are often seen as simply a collection of individuals sharing some kind of common interest.

A useful definition of a team is typically given by Katzenbach and Smith (1999): "a small number of people with complimentary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals and a working approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable" (Katzenbach and Smith, 1999; p.220).

##### ***The Need for Team Working***

Marketing work cannot be undertaken without the use of effective teams at some stage. The text refers to the need for dedicated teams composed of both line and general management for gathering information from external sources (Chapter 3, p.99), chapter 5 (p.177) refers to the effectiveness of sales teams (as opposed to individuals) in complex buying environments, chapter 7 refers to the need to work with agencies as a joint team (p.235) and chapter 9 indicates the benefits to be gained from developing an international team for the purposes of naming products (pp.344-5). Teams are often formed for short-term projects and disband once a marketing project is completed.

##### ***How to do it***

Great in theory, but somewhat problematic in practice perhaps? Of course, to say it is easy is hugely missing the point. Difficulties range, of course, from a potential lack of knowledge within the team and the resulting need for training (Chapter 2, p.59) to vague goals, difficulties of communicating within large teams and an apparent lack of accountability or structure. Robins and Finley (1998) in a text entitled 'Why Teams Don't Work' gave a list of 14 reasons why teams fail to achieve their objectives, ranging from "Teams are not part of my thinking" to a lack of feedback, incentives and trust within the team.

Developing team working skills (like any skill) generally requires learning or experimental experiences, reflection on those and some planning for future occasions. Consequently, it is not reasonable to assume that by reading this, you will become an excellent team worker, but there are some useful issues and principles to consider. It is important to recognise, of course, that teams can be as different in nature as the people from whom they are composed.

##### **Skills**

As you read the following list (which is not necessarily exhaustive), think about which areas are your strengths and which are your weaknesses, consider how you might seek feedback from others on these areas and how you might seek experiences and information in order to develop these skills further.

*Leadership* – directing, persuading, risk taking, emotional intelligence and having integrity but most of all being flexible and able to bring out the knowledge and skills of others. 'Leadership' is often seen as 'moving forward' and 'not accepting the status



quo' whereas 'management' is generally seen as enabling the team to "keep going". The leader will have a significant impact on the culture of the team, and the motivation and morale of the team members. The view of some is that the best leaders, ironically, are those who are so good at managing the contributions from others that they can sometimes have little to do.

John Adair's model of Action Centered Leadership takes the view that leadership is about ensuring that the task is completed, the team is working together well and that individuals are content and contributing as much as they need to.

Flexibility in style is important. The role of the leader will change as a team gells together (forming), works through any conflicts (storming), seeks to establish effective methods of working (norming), identifies and achieves its task (performing) and prepares to disband (adjourning). In addition, individuals on the team will come with their different emotions and personalities: bringing out contributions from all requires sensitivity to – and recognition of – what is not said as well as flexibility in the way individuals' contributions are elicited.

*Communication* – listening, questioning, answering and giving feedback (on the behaviour/ideas, not the personality) in ways that are open and respectful. There is further information on this within the website section on "Communicational Skills". Communication is hindered where teams (especially a team leader) are inappropriately critical or where there are clashes of personalities.

*Creativity* – developing ideas, brainstorming uncritically, thinking of similar problems and solutions elsewhere. The culture of the team will have an impact on how creative the team can be but if there is a novel problem to solve (e.g. a new product launch), the team will need those who can combine ideas and solutions from past experience elsewhere as well as from theoretical knowledge. It is important to recognise that even good ideas may sometimes be rejected at one time, only to reappear at another time when circumstances are more favourable.

*Decision Making* – there are a number of ways in which a team may be involved in effective decision making. Again, there is further information on this within the website section on "Decision Making".

*Managing Resources* – time, financial and physical resources. Being disciplined with resources is vital: at the start of any marketing project, resources may be in plentiful supply but it is common for marketing projects without well planned and well managed resources to go over time, over budget and/or require resources not originally in the marketing plan. Action planning must involve establishing clear objectives, deadlines, accountability, resources and contingency plans. Chapter 21 covers the implementation of planning projects in more detail.

And then there are other skills (e.g. negotiation, planning, handling conflict) which may be more or less important, depending on the skills required by the task and the length of time the team has been together. Theories of teamworking generally consider a complementary mix of abilities to be important. The most well known of these is that developed by Belbin [<http://www.belbin.co.uk/>] who identified 9 'team roles': a lack of any of those could have a significant impact on a team's performance though the nature of that impact would vary depending on the stage at which the task was completed.

### ***Developing Teamworking Skills***

1. Think about a project on which you are currently working with others. How are you working together? Which aspects are most difficult? Stop what you are doing as a group and take time to review how well you are working together, but make sure any feedback is specific, related to the task and not the individual, and addresses the problem, rather than making you feel good.
2. Think of a group you have worked with before. If you were observing the team rather than being a part of it, how would you have advised 'them' to work together better? What would you have changed?
3. With a number of others, draw up a theoretical action plan for a piece of marketing research. Who would be doing what to enable the research to achieve its objectives? By when would the actions be done? Which resources would be needed? How might they be found? What contingency planning might be needed?
4. Split a team into two groups for a communications-based exercise. One group is known as 'The Senders' and the other 'The Receivers'. The senders must work *with* the receivers to develop a form of communication which can be interpreted by the receivers over a distance of more than 30 metres, but it must not involve speaking or writing. Once done, the receivers and the senders should move apart to a distance of 30 metres. The senders should **then** choose one sentence from the text (e.g. second sentence on page 23, or third sentence in the second paragraph on page 157) and 'send' this sentence in whichever way is appropriate within a time limit of 5 minutes. Did the receivers interpret the sentence correctly?

#### References:

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