Marketing professors: paths and perspectives

Fátima Cristina Trindade Bacellar
Faculdades IBMECRJ, Recreio dos Bandeirantes, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and
Ana Akemi Ikeda
Universidade de São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil

Abstract

Purpose – The objective of this paper is to study how marketing professors see their job. How they assess their career paths, the reasons, and motivations underlying their professional choice, their points of view on the practices they employ, and their problems and difficulties, as well as the solutions they have found during the course of their professional development.

Design/methodology/approach – This study is exploratory and qualitative. Grounded theory technique was employed to collect and analyse the data.

Findings – There is a substantial diversity of professional paths and a quest for satisfaction and pleasure associated with the relative freedom and lower stress of the teaching profession, as compared to executive life.

Research limitations/implications – The exploratory and non-conclusive nature hinder the findings to be generalised and the wideness of the problem making the analysis broad but not deep.

Practical implications – Understand marketing professors and raise some ideas about how to improve teaching performance.

Originality/value – The work should be of interest to academics, professors and educational organizations seeking to improve marketing teaching and learning.

Keywords Marketing, Academic staff, Teaching, Career development, Brazil

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The traditional role of the professors encompasses three primary domains: teaching, research and service (support at department, college or university, profession, or community levels). The allocation of activities within the core triad itself is not consistent from one institution to the next, with some colleges focusing primarily on teaching, some on research, and some on service, and some evenly balanced (Rapert et al., 2002). Bowen (2005, p. 634) asserts that “... good teaching is a requisite – gone are the days when someone could be a poor teacher and a good researcher”. He adds that the point of differentiation is research, the most visible part and that helps the reputation of academic program. Research is often favoured over teaching (Albers-Miller et al., 2001) and according to Garvin (1991, p. 7) “the ‘publish or perish’ mentality has been identified with the loss of prestige of teaching and with a lack of concern with students”. On the other hand, Kelley et al. (1998) forecasting marketing education in the twenty-first century note that there will be a greater struggle to balance teaching and research in the face of more pressure for teaching and service. Additionally, Rapert et al. (2002) argue that most business professors offer their considerable skills to clients outside the standard core of responsibilities, engaging in consulting projects, training activities, personal business ventures, outside
teaching, expert witness engagements and contract/grant researches. Teaching appears to be the primary beneficiary once that these experiences are the answer to criticism that professors need more real-world experience. The debate has being long and Ferrell (1995) believes that conflict between teaching and research will intensify in the near future.

The concern with marketing teaching started back in the earliest days of this discipline, having stood out in the marketing literature of the time. The Journal of Marketing, for instance, published since 1936, included in its early volumes several papers with thoughts and practices used at that time to teach marketing. Accounts of the earliest marketing professors show that in this field, research and teaching went hand in hand (Hagerty, 1936). Specific marketing education periodicals appeared recently – Journal of Marketing Education first publication was in 1979 and the others like Marketing Education Review in 1991; Journal of Marketing for Higher Education in 1992; International Journal for Advancement of Marketing Education in 2001 and International Journal of Marketing Education in 2001 (Lehmann, 2005). If there are considerable studies approaching marketing education the same is not true when the subject is a marketing professors. The literature on this issue showed that few papers touched upon the particular concern of getting to know and understand marketing professors.

Thus, this study intends to understand marketing professors assessing their career paths, the reasons, and motivations underlying their professional choice, their points of view on the practices they employ, and their problems and difficulties, as well as the solutions they have found during the course of their professional development.

**Being a teacher: profile and characteristics**

Becoming a college educator is sometimes being seen as an alternative career. This has serious implications: being a professor by choice is quite different from “turning into” a professor.

It is clear that the professor is playing a social role and that one can, therefore, refer to it as a form of role playing. One of the teaching faculty’s main functions concerns its influence upon students, inspiring them and motivating them to study, whether by changing their perceptions and beliefs on a given theme, based on reflections developed thanks to new information transmitted and/or by reviewing existing knowledge (Timpson and Bendel-Simso, 2003, p. 21).

For Brookfield (1996), the ideal professor should be a cross between a talk-show host (in terms of humanistic empathy), news reporter (in terms of critical, penetrating and perceptive questioning), and comedian (in terms of a sharp but contextually appropriate sense of humour). This definition also conveys the idea of the professor as an actor. Sawyer (2004, p. 12) recognizes that the metaphor of acting emphasizes aspects such as presentation, transmission, voice, movement and pace. However, this can become a problem because it suggests a solo performance of the professor, the students becoming no more than passive spectators. The proposed alternative is to regard teaching as an improvised act, as this view integrates the traditional metaphors of the professor as actor, decision-maker and facilitator.

According to Sawyer (2004, p. 18), the realization that creative teaching consists of improvisation reveals that:
professors are creative professionals, who need to have not only an understanding of pedagogical content, but performing skills as well – the ability to effectively facilitate a group improvisation with the students.

Another facet added to the teaching role is reflection (Schön, 1987), which shows how professionals solve problems effectively when they reflect on new and unexpected situations, putting into practice solutions devised thanks to these reflections.

Field research

The field research has an exploratory and qualitative nature. The data collection consisted of individual in-depth interviews and the procedures used for conducting the work and analysing the data was the Grounded Theory. Grounded Theory was devised for developing theories, concepts, hypothesis and proposals on the basis of data systematically collected, and analysed, rather than on assumptions, other research, or pre-existing theoretical systems (Taylor and Bogdan, 1998, p. 137; Goulding, 2002, p. 42). It is based on a series of clearly defined procedures designed to ensure that the conclusions and therefore the ensuing theory are true to the systematically collected and analysed data (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 12).

Although its purpose is to build theories, its use does not have to be limited to those researchers that have this research purpose in mind. For Strauss and Corbin (1998, p. 288) “the researcher may use some but not all of the procedures for satisfying the objectives of research”. To choose interviewees, two aspects are taken into account: interviewee profile and the number of interviews. In this type of study, the choice of respondents must comply with different criteria from those normally employed to define a quantitative research sample. According to typical Grounded Theory procedures, the process of selecting informants (called theoretical sampling) must be carried out, first, to provide a maximum of information with the greatest variability possible, then, to make the process of constant comparison with other sources of information viable (other interviews, literature, etc.). So the researcher may combine codes and define categories and concepts; and finally, verify the understanding of the categories and present this together with the core theory developed. In this study, the choice of interviewees complied with the criteria of personal acquaintanceship with the researchers and referrals from other professors.

Ten marketing professors were interviewed, with different levels of experience (ranging from 1 to over 20 years), in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo (Brazil). All academic degree levels (undergraduate, executive programs, master’s and doctorates degrees) were contemplated, although not all the professors interviewed taught in programs of all these levels.

The interviews lasted 40-180 min and were conducted between 9 December 2003 and 7 December 2004, resulting in roughly 16 h of tapes and slightly more than 200 transcribed pages.

The interview process began with guidelines that included a series of items and questions for which it seemed interesting to get responses from the interviewees. They were based on bibliographic references, along with authors’ experience as professors in the field.

Questions asked were related to the reasons for deciding being a professor; their career paths; role as a professor; preparation/planning for the class; class performance and teaching methods; important issues to teach in marketing; their updateness...
regarding technologies and marketing subject; readings habits; reflections on students,
professors and courses evaluations; relationship with students; perspectives; and
advices for the beginners.

As the interviews advanced, the original guidelines were slightly adjusted. This
process of fine-tuning was also discussed by Strauss (1987, pp. 271-2) as something
natural and inherent to the developing maturity of the researcher himself. For Goode
and Hatt (1952, p. 239), such flexibility “allows the interviewer to express a question in
such a way as to make it easier for the informant to understand it”. In the open coding
process the ATLAS.ti version 5.0 software was used. 317 codes were obtained
specifically relating to the themes discussed in the next section ‘results and discussion’.

The theoretical basis used to interpret results was symbolic interactionism, which
means observing and extending behaviour from the participants’ point of view and
learning about their world, their interpretations of themselves in the context of certain
interactions and the dynamic properties of the interactions. For Denzin (2001, p. 119),
interpreting is “the attempt to explain meanings”, which is precisely what this study
intended.

Results and discussion
This part presents the results from the field research collected by personal interviews.
The objective of this work is to analyse how professors evaluate their job, including the
assessment of their career paths, reasons for their professional choice, their practices,
problems and solutions. Therefore, the discussion is divided in five blocks:

(1) paths and meaning of teaching;
(2) being born a teacher versus becoming a teacher;
(3) classroom performance relating to professors’ character;
(4) classroom performance relating to teaching methods and tools; and
(5) technology in the classroom.

The reasoning is taken from the interviews and literature.

Paths and meaning of teaching
It was observed a lot of variation regarding interviewees’ original education and
training, with degrees in Engineering, Economics, Psychology, and other professions
even more far removed from business. Generally speaking, dissatisfaction with the
original area of study is clear, hence the quest for an alternative.

Many individuals are drawn to academics because of flexibility of the work
schedule and environment (Rapert et al., 2002). But what makes these individuals
decide on the profession of marketing professor? What drives them? A number of
circumstances can lead up to an unexpected profession. One example is the feeling of
suffering and frustration in executive life that manifests itself frequently:

As long as I was working for a company, I was suffering non-stop. I didn’t like working for
the company; it was torture and what I enjoyed was the university.

An academic career appears to safe them from frustrations, a form of freedom of not
having a boss. A teaching career is perceived as providing this:
Another element is the quest for novelty or for dodging daily corporate routine "I don't really like such very routine things. I prefer to have different problems; more fun." The association between teaching and pleasure is also recurrent. Enjoying teaching is seen as a basic requirement for becoming a professor; in some instance, pleasure result from the pride of being a good teacher:

It's not just liking it, but being proud to be a good teacher. [...] the pride of being a good teacher. If you deliver a lecture that's not quite good enough, it bothers you.

Teach in a well reputed university also appears to bring personal status connected with being a university professor, as suggested by the following speech:

Sometimes people ask me: what do you do? I say I'm a teacher. Only that. And I watch the expression of pity on people's faces [laughter] as they look at me. Then sometimes people continue chatting and ask: but what do you teach? Then when I mention university the expression improves a bit. And when I get round to mentioning my institution, a prestigious and well-known one, I acquire a certain status, but I enjoy saying only that I'm a teacher, just to evaluate that people's expression.

At the end, the outcome of choosing a teaching career is substantial tranquillity:

Of course, all work has its drawbacks, you have to keep looking for new things all the time, but I have a great sense of accomplishment in what I do, I love it. I teach 30 class hours a week. By the end, I'm half dead, but I'm OK. I'm dead, but I go home and sleep. Before, I'd be dead, I'd go home and I couldn't sleep, I'd keep chewing things over, thinking about what to do next. So it was really sort of a lifestyle choice.

_Being born a teacher versus becoming a teacher_

The decision to be a marketing professor can come about in different ways, result from different paths, and above all, happen at different points in time in the person's professional life. Whereas certain people settle on this profession quite early in life, preparing from their youth to undertake it, others follow different roads and decide to become a professor at later stages of their professional life; they "turn into" professors suddenly, when an opportunity presents itself.

When an individual decides to become a professor, his path follows the traditional steps of an academic career; completion of the undergraduate course is followed by a master's degree, and by a doctorate after that, coupled with publishing scientific papers and beginning to teach in a good school, even if it is not regarded as a top-of-the-line one, in order to gain experience.

Those who enter the career at a later stage also face the same challenges, which then come hand in hand with added difficulties and obstacles. Generally speaking, former business executives, who may have worked for years in different companies and achieved senior corporate positions, may notice a certain prejudice regarding this career change "Then I came here and tried for a master's degree. The first year I tried I didn't get in because I was THE executive." Reconciling an executive career with an academic one also poses problems. But career change decision generally is not taken
abruptly. To the contrary, one often sees the two careers conducted in parallel for some time:

For many years I was an executive who taught at night. These dual careers demand a great deal of effort: I’d travel (…); I’d be away for two weeks every month. So, it just couldn’t be done. And what with the lessons, I’d be away, then I’d teach, it was hell.

On the other hand, the decision to change careers calls for financial and psychological planning “At the time, it’s hard, you leave a job, a pile of benefits; then suddenly, the day after, you wake up in the morning thinking: what am I going to do today?” The turnaround can be sudden, but the process is not that quick. There is even some difficulty in the process of “learning to be an academic”:

But in a sense, let’s put it this way, my path is a little different from the usual academic path. I’m sort of learning how to be an academic. Nowadays, I feel much more like a professor than a consultant or an executive. I used to be a consultant who taught, now I’m a professor who does some consulting, because I sorted myself out.

Entering the career of university professor comes about varies. Sometimes it results from an invitation of a friend, especially from one’s former professors. Another common occurrence is beginning to teach at the university where one studied:

I began teaching in the college from which I’d graduated (…) in the marketing area. And then, as I was a good student, they decided to invite me, “hey, wouldn’t you like to give a few lessons here?” And I said I’d love to.

Preparing to become a professor is approached in a very similar way by the people who decide to “turn into” a professor; there is simply no advance training; the person is “chucked into” the class room. The first classroom experiences can be anguishing and even disastrous:

I had never taught a lesson in my life and right at the start I had three night classes plus two morning classes. I was teaching advertising, consumer behaviour, marketing, and, I’d never taught this stuff before. The first lecture I ever taught was a marketing one. I prepared it fully, tidily, totally organized for one and a half hours, or one hour and twenty minutes long. I got there, started delivering my lecture and then I looked and saw that I had finished saying everything in 15 min. I had nothing more to say. I broke into a cold sweat, and I kept sweating, I was petrified. I sat down, pulled a chair, and sat in front of the class; then I stared at the class and… I kept quiet, regained my calm, returned to my original state, and finished my lecture.

As a result, the individual adopts the strategy of observation and reproduction of the teaching models he/she encountered during the course of student life:

This is something that initially made me rather tense, because in the Master’s degree course one gets no training to teach, so I just limited myself to reproducing the models that I had. We were sort of a collage. So I was a bit of Professor A, I was a bit of Professor B, I cut and pasted bits from one, from another and yet another.

As the professor who embarked upon an academic career in parallel with other activities gets positive feedback and develops the feeling that he is being well received by the students and the school, he may tend more heavily towards teaching, embracing it as the sole or the main career:
And finally it got to a point in which I started developing a balance between the areas ... between work ... executive work and teaching, but then I began losing this balance, teaching more than working until I reached a point when I gave up the executive part and truly assumed to be a professor. It was about four or five years ago that I started only teaching, and then I become a consultant in my free time. So my chief activity is teaching.

Classroom performance: on putting together the professor’s character
Review of the literature revealed that effective teaching, to a great extent depends on the characteristics on the part of teachers:

- attitudes toward self, students, peers, and what they teach;
- knowledge on the subject and education theory; and
- skills on planning, organizations, and management; on communication, and on motivation (Tootoonchi et al., 2002).

As a result of this experimentation, the professor starts to acquire his or her own style, a particular way of planning and delivering lectures. Planning the lecture is an important undertaking. The professor’s personal style is revealed. Sawyer (2004) mentions that a lecture is theatre and that a professor is an actor. For some, teaching can be as pleasurable as play-acting; it seems to be part of their personality, the very reason why they enjoy teaching:

Perhaps it has something to do with this theatrical vein of mine [...] I’ve always enjoyed the theatre; I took a theatre course [...] I acted in a theatre group. I like an audience. I dislike teaching to just one or two people, I enjoy a full classroom; I like the ambiance. I can control a class well. I think this is an innate skill.

For others, these acting calls for a long learning process and is seen as something that wears the professor down:

It’s a profession that’s very similar to acting, to being an artist. Sometimes I say I wasn’t meant to be an artist, but you have to be an artist, you just have to, you have to be an actress sometimes, you have to act, because the student also wants this representation, right? It’s also a very tiring thing.

For those who do not consider themselves good actors, who are shy or cannot tell jokes, there are alternatives. The first it using teaching tools that can offset this “shortcoming” as commented by one of the interviewee:

The students like it. And it makes it a bit more fun, doesn’t it? Perhaps it lends matters this amusing touch that I lack. So the movie does that for me; it lightens up the lecture a bit.

Classroom performance: on teaching methods and tools
Educators may use a variety of methods and tools in their classroom to aid in teaching but sometimes interest in subjects linked to the field of education seems rather limited:

I pay little attention to this. I admit it. I’d like to pay more attention to it. [...] But if I put that on my list of priorities, it’s going to rank around 15th or 16th. It would be cool to read more about education. I talk to professors a lot and in a way we end up exchanging ideas on this but still it’s way down the line.
Smart *et al.* (1999) comment that educators should be more concerned with facilitating student learning wherein the instructor is part discussion leader, counsellor, parent, and/or coach and less concerned about using previously preferred teaching methods or approaches. Nevertheless, regarding teaching methods and teaching tools, there is a great variety of opinions, attitudes and, consequently, uses. In some cases, it brings suspicion and rejection “There are professors of whom I become suspicious when they do things just based on this [techniques and tools].” This suspicion seems to be partly generated by unsuccessful experiences in applying teaching techniques:

Yes . . . it’s a technique that once I was discussing with a friend of mine that . . . he uses it a lot but personally, I tried to use it once, and it was a disaster. And this guy uses a bunch of techniques all the time. He keeps applying them all. I dislike this, I’ve never used it. I used it once and the outcome was terrible; I don’t know how to use this kind of thing and I trust my own way of working better.

Far from being an isolated case, this reflects a general lack of knowledge of teaching methods and tools among marketing teachers. Probably, this also result from the fact that professors may have had questionable or no prior pedagogical education. However, some professors mentioned how they tried to apply new techniques or use different resources:

For me, it’s a revelation every day; I’m trying to develop more, I’m trying to read and I’m applying the crazy things that I think look worthwhile.

The case method stands out as one often used in marketing, traditionally. For some professors, preparing a case takes time and calls for a lot of work:

So, when I have a new case that I’m studying, I have to spend much more time with it than preparing a PowerPoint presentation for a lecture. Because I have to, for instance, think about questions, if the class is . . . if as a group they are interested, I have to ask questions that encourage a discussion of the case, encourage them to voice their opinions on the case, sometimes even their personal opinions.

Some people state that they use them with the traditional objective in mind “Then you can give then a case study, something for [the student] to practice that subject”. But they also suggest a very different purpose as well, geared to lending the lecture a more dynamic pace:

[. . .] if you have an eight-hour lecture, for instance, you can’t deliver an eight-hour exposition. Nobody will stand it for eight hours, even if there’s a coffee break and lunch; nobody can take eight hours of continuous speech. So you have to provide a case study, you have to provide the guys with some dynamic activities.

**Technology in the classroom: levers, crutches, and excess showmanship**

In the age of rapid technological innovation, professors are using various technology tools to assist them in class. Where teaching tools are concerned, the use of technology in class stands out, such as computers for showing PowerPoint slides — the most frequently technology used by professors according to Peterson *et al.* (2002) —, assorted multimedia tools like videos of advertising, movies or technical films, and even the Web. Though most respondents use them to some extent, as well as with the case
method, opinions of these tools vary a lot. Technology can be seen as excellent, but one may need to learn how to exploit it better as taken from this assessment:

I think this technology is good, having classes with a monitor, a computer, and the internet. I think it’s good. It’s a cool tool. I still try to use these tools better; I think one can use them more. So this makes teaching much easier and I think that I still need to learn how to exploit these tools better.

Generally, the professors emphasize that this tool must not be used as “a crutch”. The following account summarizes the concern with becoming overly dependent on tools, especially on PowerPoint “I keep asking myself, what this professor would do if there were a power shortage, if there were no more PowerPoint? How would this guy get by?” Inappropriate use of tools merely as a way of grabbing student attention is one of their concerns:

And this leads us back to the question: can you hold the guy’s attention? You play 50 commercials in class and everybody sits there and watches them. But so what? What did they learn from that? So, I think this is a problem.

We also noticed some radically unfavourable points of view, such as “A good professor and good students don’t need anything, not a thing” and “a professor who’s a real teacher doesn’t need to use this stuff”. In both cases, these opinions were voiced by professors who had also stated that they actually used technology in the classroom, pointing to a clear contradiction.

The line of discourse on the quest for balance is constant and appears to be linked to the professor’s maturity as a teacher. “[…] one must also take great care not to have too many images, with no justification from the content point of view. But little by little one also learns how to gauge these things.”

On one hand one can regard such tools as supports; on the other hand, overusing them, especially the audiovisual tools, can be seen as very bad, something that must be avoided if the professor does not want to be seen merely as a “showman” devoid of content and value, a mere deliverer of talks. The term “show lecture”, frequently used by the interviewees, defines this type of presentation, which is more likely to materialize in marketing than in other disciplines:

It [technology] has to be a support, it cannot… supersede the lecture’s purpose, or it will turn into a show of the kind that people in the marketing field are well aware of…

Generally speaking, there was a unanimous rejection of “show lectures” and “showman professors”. None of the interviewees admitted to being regarded as such; for some, this would be a serious offence, whereas others reacted to the idea more calmly, simply indicating it has nothing to do with their personal style, as they do not want to be confused with a “narrator of cases”:

No, I hate that, I despise the showman type of professor… I admit it. It’s arrogant. I despise showman professors. That’s not being a teacher. […] I think one must take care in dealing with the issue of examples. It’s useless to keep talking about cases and telling them… because then the fundaments will be missing and it becomes… senseless, right? There must be something behind it. It becomes just talk with no… [content]. The show-type lecture… after you squeeze it…
Still, using audiovisual tools is not synonymous with delivering a “show lecture”. The key feature of these “show lectures” appears to be that these tools are used with no clear teaching purpose, i.e. they are used as if they were sufficient in and of themselves, images being shown for their own sake, rather than to underpin concepts, or in lieu of a properly conducted wrap-up by the professor.

Final thoughts
Good teachers and the effectiveness of teaching have been studied ever since Plato described how Socrates taught by asking questions (Beishuizen et al., 2001) but the discussion is far from reaching an end. Most of universities hire professors to teach but evaluate them as researchers relegating teaching assessment mainly to the students. Aiming to know the point of view of professors about their job, focusing on teaching, this work approaches marketing instructors considering their professional development path, teaching activity and their performance.

Many of this study’s findings on teaching can be regarded as applying to university teaching in general, though certain points may be more specific to marketing teaching. The main findings of this study on the interaction between professors and teaching, are:

• A great diversity of professional career paths, with some people discovering quite early in life that they want to teach and have a vocation for it, whereas others choose a teaching career in more advanced stages of their professional development. The latter may hold a teaching career in parallel with another one for a while, choosing to convert it into their main activity at some point in time, for a variety of reasons.
• A quest for satisfaction and pleasure coupled with the relative freedom and stress reduction that the teaching profession offers in comparison with the life of an executive.
• An ongoing search for novelties, challenges and different opportunities for realizing one’s potential.

Understanding professors’ point of view education can raise some ideas about how to improve classroom performance, and institutions can offer better conditions to their necessities in class, research, or service and consequently enhance the results.

Like all research, no matter how well prepared and carefully conducted, this study has its limitations, namely: its exploratory and non-conclusive nature (the findings presented herein cannot be regarded as applicable to all situations); the choice of questions asked (in that different questions might reveal other approaches, enriching the findings or leading them in a different direction); time and budget limitations (the decision on the number of interviewees was taken also taking these elements into account); and cultural aspect where the field research was taken can affect the outcome.

This research can give basis for future and more conclusive studies by crossing and comparing information, for instance, professor’s performance with:

• teaching methods;
• the fact of being a teacher by choice or of turning into a teacher; and
• psychographic profile.
Understanding the student point of view might also bring new reflections and complement this work.

To end this study Chonko’s (2003, p. 12) citation is very appropriate “if any of us hopes to achieve excellence we must have a passion for our students, for learning, for communication knowledge, for research”, as well as, Millers’s (1987, p. 31) “each generations of teachers needs to rediscover its own trusts about teaching”.

References


**Corresponding author**

Fátima Cristina Trindade Bacellar can be contacted at: cbacellar@ibmecrj.br

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