



EXAMINER'S REPORT

MAY 2003

MARKETING PLANNING & MANAGEMENT

General Comments

It is often the case that exam technique and the effective application of knowledge and skill to an exam question or case study is the differentiator between students achieving a high grade and those who barely manage to achieve a pass grade. This is particularly the case in final year exams, where the majority of students have sufficient knowledge to manage to pass the marketing paper. For this reason, it is worth reviewing what is expected of students if they are to achieve A and B grades. The Examiner expects that students demonstrate an ability to relate course material to the work environment and to use analytical tools appropriately.

An A or B grade student will show evidence of wide reading and an ability to link different elements of the course. Evidence of learning from the programme is obvious and is well supported by practical examples and application of theory. The case will have been well studied in advance of the exam and the student will be able to apply various analytical models and, most importantly, use them to draw conclusions which are relevant to the questions set.

A weaker paper is likely to have a lot of descriptive writing with little analysis. Responses are often poorly thought out and difficult to follow. Layout is usually poor with no, or few, subheadings. There is an answer to the question posed, but marks are thrown away on unfocused arguments. There is little evidence of several years study of marketing.

One of the most common weaknesses in fourth year papers is to drag in, unannounced, an analytical model, such as the Ansoff Matrix, and put it in the middle of a strategy question, without either applying it to the subject at hand or drawing any conclusions or recommendations as a result of using the analytical tool. It is expected that students are not only familiar with the range of analytical tools but can actually *apply* them to a marketing problem.

Another problem area, particularly in the case study answers, is to make points or claims without providing any evidence to substantiate the viewpoint taken. A general answer, based on opinion rather than analysis, is not adequate to pass the Marketing Planning and Management Paper.

1. Case: Marketing and Growth Strategies – A Software Case

This case study on Qumas, a software company facing a number of serious challenges in terms of its strategy for growth, raised some very interesting marketing issues.

- (a) Students were asked to assess the effectiveness of Qumas's primary sales strategy and to critically examine the opportunities and limitations of their adopted approach. As a response to this question, students were expected to examine the company's current strategy, assessing why it had been successful thus far and to look at how it should structure its sales strategy for the company's growth in the US market. Students who performed well examined not only Qumas's track record, but also that of its key competitors and were able to identify serious weaknesses in the Qumas strategy, in particular the company's inability to expand using direct sales only and the bottom up approach to selling.
 - (b) A question on the pharmaceutical industry, the target market for Qumas, produced some very weak answers. Opinion took the place of analysis in many cases. Some students failed to apply any model to their analysis or follow any structure in their response. Candidates were expected to identify the key features of the industry, for example the size of the multinational buyers relative to the size of Qumas, the highly regulated nature of the market and the fact that competitors and buyers were clearly identified. Students were expected to evaluate the attractiveness of this market for Qumas, given its size, experience and company capabilities.
 - (c) In the final section, candidates were asked to recommend and justify a growth strategy for Qumas. Some of the stronger candidates produced short, medium and longterm growth strategies for the company's European and US markets.
2. A very clear question on the value and limitations of product portfolio analysis techniques didn't always produce very comprehensive answers. A sizable proportion of students simply presented the Boston Consultancy Group Product Portfolio Matrix without analysing its value and limitations. In many cases, no further matrices were assessed and the clear requirement to assess the value and limitations of portfolio techniques was ignored.
 3. The key output from this module is that students should be able to draw up a marketing plan. Those who attempted this question tended to know their subject extremely well and were able to achieve a very high mark by outlining the steps from the goal setting phase, through to the situation review, strategy formulation and finally resource allocation and monitoring.
 4. A question on creating and sustaining competitive advantage required the candidate to analyse the three key dimensions to competitive advantage: high perceived value, low delivered cost and the scope of markets served (niche or mass). It was very clear that some students had studied this section of their course properly, while others attempted to waffle their way through some general blather on competitive advantage, picking up few marks in the process. Some students were able to discuss competitive advantage in the context of the macro- and micro-business system and were able to provide some examples of companies that had successfully created and sustained competitive advantage by being aware of the options and efficiencies available within the entire business system.
 5. A question on Ryanair's success as a 'no frills' company produced some remarkably good answers. Students were very well informed about the reasons for Ryanair's success and produced, in general, a very good analysis of the company. It was very gratifying to see that candidates understood that it was Ryanair's innovation across a range of activities, from distribution and ticketing to clear marketing positioning based on cost leadership that has led to its success.

6. Media fragmentation presents one of the greatest challenges to marketers seeking to build brand. A question on how companies should cope with this challenge produced some very weak answers. Rather than analyse the challenge, many students produced a general answer on how the promotional mix can be used to build brand. There was no 'right' answer to this question, as indeed in reality there is no 'right' solution to the fragmentation problem. Students could have discussed the potential of the new media and channels to reach audiences or could have emphasised the need to integrate above and below the line marketing strategies. Their answers should have been supported by examples of companies that have been highly innovative in building their brand. The main point of the question was to examine how students approach a real marketing challenge.