

PhD Application Personal Essay by Scott Rader

Motivation

My primary reason for seeking a PhD is to refine and channel my 12 years of experiential knowledge in product development and consumer relations in order to address industry problems and challenges in marketing technology products. Through research and teaching, my goal is to contribute to the body of knowledge that aims to improve marketing, especially with regard to understanding how consumers demand and use technology products.

Professional Experience

I grew up working on a small farm in rural upper east Tennessee. My father bought me a Commodore Vic 20 personal computer when I was ten years old, which started my interest in technology. Although I understood and mastered the bits and bytes of the machine, my fascination was more about how people and computers relate -- the “human” aspect of technology. After high school I began working for Prodigy, the largest online service provider at the time and pioneer of online advertising, bulletin boards, real-time electronic chat and consumer web access. I spent the first few years answering telephone calls and working face-to-face with customers, often disgruntled, but all trying to utilize the new technologies of online and internet access. Moving up the ranks at Prodigy during the early and mid-1990s, I became versed in the “business” of technology, and was put in charge of surveying consumers to better understand how to build effective online applications such as self-help tools and electronic bulletin boards. Prodigy gave me the opportunity to explore a diverse cross-section of a cutting-edge industry, from programming and web site design to market research and customer relations management.

With several years of experience under my belt and the “dot com” era at its peak, I was recruited in 1999 by About.com, the seventh most popular website in the world. As vice president of product development, I led a team of technical, creative and marketing specialists in building a “self serve” bid-for-placement advertising system, which accounted for 20% of About.com’s revenue within one year of launch. My focus was on understanding and representing the “voice of the customer” to senior management and technology developers. Eventually the platform was sold to Google, where it was integrated into their successful “AdSense” advertising tool. During this assignment, I refined my knowledge about internet marketing, specifically with regard to contextually relevant advertising, a newly emerging tactic that arose as a response to the lackluster performance of banner and pop-up ads.

In addition to working in the United States, I have significant international business experience. While working for About.com, I was dispatched to Japan where I collaborated with marketing managers and programmers to build a Japanese version of the advertising application I had managed in the United States. More recently, I spent

three months working for PricewaterhouseCoopers in Vietnam, conducting customer value determination and segmentation research in order to create a marketing campaign for the firm's IT advisory services in Indochina. I also have experience working in Mexico and Cuba.

Education

I forfeited a traditional college life to work in the nascent and burgeoning IT industry during the mid- to late-1990s. While gaining technology and marketing experience in New York City's fast-paced "Silicon Alley", I self-financed my undergraduate education and obtained a Bachelor of Arts in Media Studies from the State University of New York at Purchase. The specialized degree involved coursework that examined the impact of various media on society, economics, art and culture. Studying television, radio, film, print and the internet against a backdrop of communications psychology created a useful juxtaposition to my "day job" of working directly with consumers in the emerging and often bewildering internet industry. Immediately upon graduation, I was hired by SUNY as an adjunct lecturer to teach several courses and seminars, including web design, multimedia and technology-related consumer issues. As a result of this assignment and feedback from other professors and students, I was invited by the Copyright Lawyer's Association of America to speak as an expert panelist at New York City's prestigious Princeton Club, fielding questions about online consumer behavior and marketing digital music.

After working in the IT industry for over 10 years, I was encouraged by executive mentors to pursue my MBA. To diversify my experience, I sought a holistic curriculum instead of one that was primarily focused on information technology. Specifically, I was interested in understanding more traditional and far-reaching aspects of marketing. After declining an offer from Georgia Institute of Technology, I accepted placement at the University of Tennessee and underwent an educational transformation from understanding what was happening "in the field" to what was best practice in strategy and tactics.

Research Interests and Post-PhD Goals

Technology product design has historically been relegated to the domain of engineers, and as author and marketing consultant Geoffrey Moore characterizes it, a "chasm" typically exists between tech-savvy early adopters and mainstream consumers. Specifically, I am interested in understanding how to cross that chasm and make products that are more accessible to a diverse and growing consumer base. With my professional experience serving as an impetus for my research interests, my goal is to leverage knowledge of "real world" situations (and mistakes), complemented by academic rigor, in order to better understand and explain how consumers affect and are effected by the constantly evolving stream of technology offerings.

I feel there is an appropriate fit for study of this "interaction" with UT's faculty, many of whom are already familiar with me, my background, and my potential. Dr. David

Schumann would offer me a solid grounding in consumer behavior, particularly as it relates to electronic commerce. During the MBA program, Dr. Kenneth Kahn provided instruction on the discipline of product development, especially the transition from engineering labs to the marketplace. I would anticipate working with him to further explore technology product conceptualization, usability testing and release cycles. Obtaining a PhD has been a long-term goal that crystallized during the MBA program. My legacy of professional and academic accomplishments might stand as testament to the fact that I readily “buckle down” to get hard work done. I look forward to taking my PhD in marketing, and hope to do so by continuing my studies at the University of Tennessee.