

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CULTURAL DIMENSIONS AND INTERNATIONAL VENDOR SELECTION CRITERIA

Jerrold Van Winter, Hood College
Marilyn Liebrez-Himes, The George Washington University

ABSTRACT

International vendor selection has been a lightly researched area of organizational buying behavior. The few studies in the field have examined differences in the importance of vendor selection criteria to purchasers across countries, but did not attempt to identify the potential cause of these differences. The present study surveyed purchasers in the United States and Germany and identified differences in the importance placed on vendor selection criteria factors. The study then took the additional step of examining to see if there was a relationship between these perceived differences and differences in the cultural dimensions of purchasers, a relationship which has been suggested but not tested by earlier studies. A relationship was found between Hofstede's cultural dimension of uncertainty avoidance and the vendor selection factors of quality, price, vendor reputation, firm characteristics and vendor attitude. In addition, a relationship was found between individualism and the quality, price and vendor attitude factors.

JEL: M16, M31

KEYWORDS: International Organization Buyer Behavior, International Vendor Selection

INTRODUCTION

This study examines the relationship between the importance placed upon international vendor selection criteria and the cultural dimensions of individual purchasers in the United States and Germany. In addition, vendor selection criteria factors were developed based on a set of commonly used vendor selection criteria variables for the first time. Importer behavior has been a relatively under researched area in the international exchange literature (Liang and Parkhe, 1997). The least studied stage of importer behavior has been vendor selection (Ghymn and Jaffe, 2003), even though this stage takes on increased importance when purchasing internationally (Liang and Parkhe, 1997).

There have only been a limited number of studies that have examined importer vendor search behavior in different countries. For the most part these studies examined vendor search when the buyers were purchasing a variety of goods and services. Because of the use of different goods and services it is difficult to draw any conclusions about perceived differences in buyer behavior. This study focuses on buyers purchasing the same type of software services in the United States and Germany. Services are the fastest growing segment of world trade, expanding at twice the rate of the trade in goods from 2005-2011 (WTO, 2012). By focusing on one type of service and collecting data on the cultural dimensions of individual purchasers in these countries, this study was able to explore the relationship between cultural variables and the importance placed on vendor selection criteria.

The goal of this study is to provide researchers and practitioners with one of the first building blocks in understanding the relationship between culture and international buyer behavior as well as to examine how this information might impact international marketers. A second contribution of this study is that it takes Dickson's (1966) often used vendor selection criteria variables and reduces them to a smaller grouping of vendor selection factors, as it has been suggested that purchasers combine vendor selection

criteria into a smaller number of choices when buying (Rao and Seshandri, 1996). To conduct this research the variables were first slightly modified to reflect their use in the services and international trade. The identification of these particular factors for the first time will be helpful with future international vendor research. This paper will examine the literature relevant to this study in the areas of international vendor selection and cultures relationship to buying behavior, will discuss the data and methodology used in the study, provide the study's results, and will conclude with a discussion of the relevance and importance of the findings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Each of the three original complex models of organizational buyer behavior (Robinson, Faris, and Wind, 1967, Webster and Wind, 1972, Sheth, 1973) contained multiple stages. The stage that has been cited as taking on increased importance in both services marketing and international buyer behavior is the vendor selection (selection of suppliers) stage (Liang and Parkhe, 1997, Berry, 2000, Hakansson and Wootz, 1975). It is, therefore, surprising that the vendor search stage has been identified as the least studied aspect of import behavior (Ghymn and Jaffe, 2003). Research in the area of international vendor selection is rather thin and fragmented. Much of the research in the field has been conducted by Ghymn, in conjunction with other researchers (Ghymn and Jaffe, 2003, Ghymn, Mattsson and Cho, 2001, Ghymn, Liesch and Mattson, 1999, Ghymn and Jacobs, 1993, Ghymn, Johnson and Zhang, 1993, Ghymn, Srinil and Johnson, 1993, Ghymn and Jacobs, 1983). Each of these studies was conducted in individual countries, though a few of the studies included cross country comparisons with results of earlier studies. Differences in the perceived importance placed upon vendor selection criteria were identified.

The criteria of price, quality and delivery were most often listed as being the most important, though the ranking of the three criteria varied by country. However, because the studies were conducted at different times, the exact products being purchased were not mentioned and the purchasers were from non-related groups, it is not possible to attribute the differences to country differences. A study by Thayer and Wilcox (2006) conducted in Canada found that three of the top six rated criteria were related to pricing. Two studies in the United States (Scully and Fawcett, 1994 and Alguire, Frear and Metcalf, 1994) identified price as being the primary motivation for companies to source internationally. Paul and Wooster (2010) found that the need to lower costs is a significant determinant in offshore outsourcing.

One of the few studies that linked the perceived importance placed on selected suppliers' attributes to differences in culture was conducted by Rao and Seshadri (1996) in India and Nigeria. While buying behavior differences were found between the two countries and attributed to culture based on differences in "uncertainty avoidance" and "individualism", this study also highlights the need for additional studies in the area. For example, cultural measurements were not done at the individual level and another country's (Turkey) cultural dimensions were substituted for Nigeria, because cultural dimension measurements were not available for Nigeria.

Several researchers have indicate that cultural differences are associated with international industrial buying behavior differences (Rao and Seshadri, 1996, Money, Gilley and Graham, 1998, Hewett, Money and Sharma, 2006, Carter, Maltz, Maltz, Goh and Yan, 2010). Khan, Niazi and Ahmad (2011) identified language and culture as the only common frequently cited barrier in offshore vendor selection. The most widely accepted cultural frameworks in marketing and international business research are Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions. Hofstede's (2001) five dimensions include uncertainty avoidance, individualism, power distance, masculinity, and long-term versus short-term orientation. Of these five dimensions, the dimensions of uncertainty avoidance and individualism have been identified as having the greatest impact on international buying behavior (Rao and Seshadri, 1996, Murray and Blenkhorn, 1983, Bowman, Farley and Schmittlein, 2000, Roth, 1995; Straughan and Albers-Miller, 2001). However, the relationship between these two critical dimensions and the importance that international services buyers place on vendor selection criteria has never been studied at the individual level. Examining the

relationship of culture to the importance of vendor selection criteria may be clearer when the purchase of a service is studied. This is because of the potential for culture to have a greater impact on service providers, as opposed to goods providers, as mentioned often in the international services literature (Samiee, 1999, Javalgi and White, 2002; Berthon, Pitt, Katsikeas and Berthon, 1999, Reardon, Erramilli and Dzousa 1996, Fugate and Zimmerman 1996, Stauss and Mang 1999, Swift 1999, Lovelock 1999, Van Birgelen, de Ruyter and Wetzels, 2000). Reasons provided for culture's greater impact on services providers include the close interaction required between customers and service vendors exacerbating cultural differences, and the difficulty of controlling perceptions regarding an intangible service in another culture (Reardon, Erramilli and Dzousa, 1996, Fugate and Zimmerman, 1996).

The increased importance of the vendor selection stage to buyers when purchasing internationally (Liang and Parkhe, 1997, Hakansson and Wootz, 1975) and when buying services as opposed to goods (Berry, 2000) has also been identified. Berry (2000) found that due to the intangible nature of services (where a service often can't be seen or touched) buyers rely more on their evaluation of the vendor, as opposed to the service, when selecting a service. The Hakansson and Wootz (1975), Dickson (1966), Dempsey (1978), and Cardoza and Cagley (1971) studies did examine the impact of uncertainty on vendor selection in a domestic setting. However, it was the uncertainty of the buying situation as opposed to the uncertainty avoidance of the buyer that was discussed. Hakansson and Wootz (1975) found that buyers in high uncertainty situations cited a vendor's geographic location as the most important vendor selection criterion, whereas price was identified as the most important vendor characteristic in low uncertainty situations. Dickson (1966) and Dempsey (1978) similarly concluded that the lower the perceived risk, such as the purchase of office supplies, the greater the importance placed on price. Cardoza and Cagley (1971) found that the higher the perceived risk, the greater the importance placed on the vendor's reputation.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research study is to determine if there are differences in the perceived importance that international buyers place on vendor selection criteria across cultures for a given buying situation. This study employed a cross sectional survey in the United States and Germany to determine the perceived importance purchasers placed on vendor selection criteria. The cultural dimensions of the respondents were also measured at the individual level. The survey instrument was translated to German and then back-translated to English by individuals fluent in both English and German, who also had experience in the computer software field. A pretest using concurrent think-aloud interviews was conducted with a panel of experts. In addition, the think aloud method was used with four respondents in Germany to understand their interpretation of the German language survey questions as they completed the survey, to test if the intent of the questions was translated correctly. The data was collected in 2008.

The target audience for this research was organizational buyers from organizations that had purchased an intellectual property (IP) legal software system within the last three years, or organizations that were contemplating the purchase of IP software. Contact information for the organizational buyers was obtained from a marketing database provided by a leading IP software system provider. There were 2,017 potential contacts in the United States, and 933 potential contacts in Germany. The response rate in the United States was 7.8 percent (157 survey responses) and the response rate from Germany was 10.2 percent (95 survey responses). The vendor selection criteria used in this study were Dickson's (1966) vendor selection criteria (modified for the services trade), and updated with the addition of one criterion identified in the international vendor choice literature. The initial vendor selection criteria used in the study is included in Table 1.

Table 1: Vendor Selection Criteria

1.	The net price (including discounts and freight charges) offered by each vendor.
2.	The ability of each vendor to meet quality specifications consistently.
3.	The support services likely to be given by each vendor.
4.	The ability of each vendor to meet specified delivery schedules.
5.	The geographical location of each vendor.
6.	The financial position and credit rating of each vendor.
7.	The production facilities and capacity of each vendor
8.	The amount of past business that had been done with each vendor.
9.	The technical capability (including research and development facilities) of each vendor.
10.	The management and organization of each vendor.
11.	The future purchases each vendor would be expected to make from your firm.
12.	The communication system (with information on progress data of orders) of each vendor.
13.	The operational controls (Including reporting, quality control, and inventory control system) of each vendor.
14.	The position in the industry (including product leadership and reputation) of each vendor.
15.	The labor relations record of each vendor.
16.	The attitude of each vendor toward your organization.
17.	The desire for your business shown by each vendor.
18.	The warranties and claims policies of each vendor.
19.	The ability of each vendor to meet your packaging requirements for his product.
20.	The impression made by each vendor in personal contacts with you.
21.	The availability of training aids and educational courses in the use of the product of each vendor.
22.	Compliance or likelihood of compliance with your procedures (both bidding and operating) by each vendor.
23.	The performance history of each vendor.
24.	Responsiveness to your needs of each vendor.

Based on the results of the “think aloud” pretests conducted with IP software buyers, the following changes were made to the variables to reflect their use in the software buying process: “Annual maintenance charge of each vendor” was added, since it is an important criterion when purchasing software. Item number 3 was modified from Dickson’s “The repair service likely to be given by each vendor.” to “The support services likely to be given by each vendor.”, However, the “Labor relations record”, “Packaging ability” and “Reciprocal arrangements” criteria were removed, since they did not apply to the software industry in this study.

Each item was measured using a 5-point scale, with anchor points being “very important to not important”. Dickson’s vendor selection criteria have not previously been reduced to a smaller number of factors, although it has been suggested that buyers combine criteria into a smaller number of choices to simplify the decision process when selecting vendors (Rao and Seshandri, 1996). An exploratory factor analysis was, therefore, run using the responses to the vendor selection criteria questions listed above. Based on the exploratory factor analysis, five vendor selection criteria factors were identified. The “Operating Controls”, “Training aids”, and “Responsiveness to needs” criteria were dropped based on the exploratory factor analysis results. The “Performance history” criterion was dropped due to the confirmatory factor analysis results. Table 2 displays the remaining five vendor selection factors, with their corresponding criteria listed below.

Table 2: Final Factor Analysis Vendor Selection Factors

Factor	Variables
Quality	Quality Technical Capability Support Services Warranty & Claims Policies Procedural Compliance
Price	Price Annual Maintenance Charge
Firm Characteristics	Production Facilities and Capacity Geographic Location Financial Position
Vendor Reputation and Past Business	Amount of Past Business Management and Organization Reputation and Position in Industry
Vendor Attitude	Desire for Business Attitude Impression

Hofstede's dimensions were originally evaluated at the country level, however, it was deemed appropriate to examine the cultural dimensions at the individual level for this study. The uncertainty avoidance and individualism levels were therefore measured using Jung's (2002) individual level measurements. Multiple regression analysis was used to examine the relationship between uncertainty avoidance (UA) and individualism (IND), and the perceived importance of the vendor selection criteria factors. The following multiple regression model was used to address these relationships: Perceived Importance = $b_0 + b_1 \text{ UA} + b_2 \text{ IND} + e$

Research Objectives

A review of the literature indicates that there were differences across countries in the perceived importance buyers place on vendor selection criteria (Ghymn and Jaffe, 2003, Ghymn and Jacobs, 1993). Cultural differences have been identified as being related to buyer behavior differences across countries (Rao and Seshadri, 1996, Lowe and Corkindale, 1998, Grunert and Scherhorn, 1990, Clark, 1990). Hofstede's (1980) uncertainty avoidance and individualism dimensions have been identified as the two cultural dimensions most responsible for impacting differences in international buyer behavior (Rao and Seshadri, 1996, Murray and Blenkhorn, 1983, Bowman, Farley and Schmittlein, 2000, Roth, 1995, Straughan and Albers-Miller, 2001).

This cultural difference based explanation for differences in buyer behavior is partially supported by several studies. Rao and Seshadri (1996) located differences between India and Nigeria in the importance placed on selected supplier-attributes by industrial buyers, and attributed the differences to culture. Yaveroglu and Donthu (2002) found that societies that are lower on individualism and higher on uncertainty avoidance (Japan) were higher on imitation than societies higher on individualism and lower on uncertainty avoidance (the United States). Individuals in Japan have been found to have a tendency to collect more information from their peers about their experiences before purchasing. In a similar study, Money, Gilley and Graham (1998) found that risk averse and less individualistic Japanese companies were more likely to use word-of-mouth referrals, than less risk averse and more individualistic American companies. Based upon the proceeding discussion and a review of the literature, the following general research propositions are advanced:

P1: There is a relationship between an individual's level of uncertainty avoidance and the perceived importance of vendor selection factors.

P2: There is a relationship between an individual's level of individualism and the perceived importance of vendor selection factors.

In general, the following sub-propositions are based on the premise that individuals with lower uncertainty avoidance and higher individualism levels (the United States) have less concern about the risk involved in the non-tangible vendor selection factors of quality, firm characteristics, vendor reputation and vendor attitude. These purchasers, therefore, put a greater emphasis on the more tangible vendor selection factor of price. However, individuals with higher uncertainty avoidance and lower individualism levels (Germany) put less emphasis on price and greater emphasis on the less tangible vendor criteria of quality, firm characteristics, vendor reputation and vendor attitude. The sub-propositions for Proposition 1 and 2 follow, detailing the expected relationship between uncertainty avoidance (and individualism) and the individual vendor selection factors:

PIA: There is a positive relationship between an individual's level of uncertainty avoidance and the perceived importance of the "Quality" vendor selection criteria factor.

P1B: There is a negative relationship between an individual’s level of uncertainty avoidance and the perceived importance of the “Price” vendor selection criteria factor.

P1C: There is a positive relationship between an individual’s level of uncertainty avoidance and the perceived importance of the “Firm Characteristics” vendor selection criteria factor.

P1D: There is a positive relationship between an individual’s level of uncertainty avoidance and the perceived importance of the “Vendor Reputation/Past Business” vendor selection criteria factor.

P1E: There is a positive relationship between an individual’s level of uncertainty avoidance and the perceived importance of the “Vendor Attitude” vendor selection criteria factor.

P2A: There is a negative relationship between and individual’s level of individualism and the perceive importance of the “Quality” vendor selection criteria factor.

P2B: There is a positive relationship between an individual’s level of individualism and the perceived importance of the “Price” vendor selection criteria factor.

P2C: There is a negative relationship between an individual’s level of individualism and the perceived importance of the “Firm Characteristics” vendor selection criteria factor.

P2D: There is a negative relationship between an individual’s level of individualism and the perceived importance of the “Vendor Reputation/Past Business” vendor selection criteria factor.

P2E: There is a negative relationship between an individual’s level of individualism and the perceived importance of the “Vendor Attitude” vendor selection criteria factor.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Multiple regression analysis was used to test Propositions P1A through P1E. Table 3 displays the results of regressing the independent measure, the Uncertainty Avoidance factor, with the Vendor Selection Criteria factors.

Table 3: Multiple Regression Results For Vendor Selection Factors and Uncertainty Avoidance in the United States and Germany (N=252)

Dependent Variables	T-statistic	P value	R-squared
Quality	4.02	0.001*	0.29
Price	-5.36	0.001*	0.36
Firm Characteristics	1.94	0.053**	0.05
Vendor Reputation	1.91	0.058**	0.12
Vendor Attitude	3.26	0.002*	0.13

*This table shows the regression estimates of the equation: Perceived Importance = b₀ + b₁ UA + e. The dependent variables listed are the five Vendor Selection Criteria. ** and * indicate significance at the 10 and 5 percent levels respectively.*

The results indicate there is a positive relationship between an individual’s level of uncertainty avoidance and the perceived importance of the “Quality” and “Vendor Attitude” vendor selection criteria factors in the United States and Germany, which supports Proposition P1A and P1E. The uncertainty avoidance factor also had a significant negative relationship with the perceived importance of the “Price” vendor selection criteria factor in the United States and Germany, which supports proposition P1B.

The results of the analysis of uncertainty avoidance and the perceived importance of the “Firm Characteristics” and the “Vendor Reputation” vendor selection criteria factors only found a marginally

significant positive relationships, which partially supports proposition P1C and P1D. Multiple regression analysis was also used to test Propositions P2A through P2E. Table 4 displays the results of regressing the independent measure, the Individualism factor, with the Vendor Selection Criteria.

Table 4: Multiple Regression Results For Vendor Selection Factors and Individualism in the United States and Germany (N=252)

Dependent Variables	T-statistic	P value	R-squared
Quality	-5.38	0.001*	0.29
Price	4.06	0.001*	0.36
Firm Characteristics	-0.46	0.643	0.05
Vendor Reputation	-1.47	0.142	0.12
Vendor Attitude	-2.09	0.037*	0.13

*This table shows the regression estimates of the equation: Perceived Importance = $b_0 + b_1 IND + e$. The dependent variables listed are the five Vendor Selection Criteria. ** and * indicate significance at the 10 and 5 percent levels respectively.*

The results indicate that individualism has a significant positive relationship with the perceived importance of the “Price” vendor selection criteria factor. This study, therefore, supports Proposition P2B. The results of the regression analysis indicate that individualism has a significant negative relationship with the perceived importance of the “Quality” and “Vendor Attitude vendor selection criteria factors, which supports propositions P2A and P2E. Individualism did not have a significant relationship with the perceived importance of the “Firm Characteristics” and “Vendor Reputation” vendor selection criteria factors. Consequently, the study does not support proposition P2C and P2D. Overall, Proposition P1, that there is a relationship between Uncertainty Avoidance and the five vendor selection factors, is supported, as there is a significant or marginally significant relationship between uncertainty avoidance and each of the vendor selection factors. However, Proposition P2, that there is a relationship between individualism and the five vendor selection factors, is only partially supported.

These Uncertainty Avoidance relationship results were not unexpected, as previous studies had indicate that quality is considered the vendor selection criteria of most importance in countries that are relatively high on the uncertainty avoidance dimension, such as Israel, Japan, and Thailand (Ghymn and Jaffe, 2003, Ghymn and Jacobs, 1993, Ghymn, Srinil and Johnson, 1993). These findings also support previous studies which had found price was the vendor selective criteria of greatest perceived importance in countries which had relatively low uncertainty avoidance levels, such as the United States, Canada and Denmark (Ghymn and Jacobs, 1983, Thaver and Wilcock, 2006, Overby and Servais, 2005). Conversely, price was of lower perceived importance in countries with a relatively high uncertainty avoidance level, such as Japan, China and Thailand.

The results of the study in regard to the individualism were not as conclusive as they were with uncertainty avoidance. This result was not surprising in that while uncertainty avoidance is often identified as being related to international buyer behaviors in the literature, individualism is often mentioned as being a secondary influence, as in the international buyer behavior study of Bowman, Farley and Schmittlein (2000). Diamantopoulos, et.al. (2003) went even further, stating that uncertainty avoidance was the one dimension from Hofstede’s (1980) cultural framework that would be particularly helpful in exploring buying behavior across countries. That said, the study did find there was a significant relationship between individualism and the perceived importance of the quality, price and vendor attitude vendor selection criteria.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This study had two primary goals. It is the first study to expand Dickson’s (1966) vendor selection criteria to an international setting. Dickson’s work is often cited as a foundational vendor selection study, but the work had not been used in an international arena. The study also reduced these vendor selection criteria to

a smaller number of factors. These factors were similar to those first proposed and appear to be intuitively logical. The availability of these factors will benefit researchers looking to extend this research into other countries, and in the examination of vendor selection with other products. This research was also unique in proposing a relationship between an individual(s) levels of uncertainty avoidance and individualism, and the perceived importance of vendor selection factors. The few importer vendor selection studies that incorporated culture previously, such as Rao and Seshadri's (1996) study, used Hofstede's cultural dimensions at the country level.

In addition, the finding that uncertainty avoidance and individualism are related to differences in the perceived importance of vendor selection criteria in the United States and Germany was based on a study involving a single service and similar samples of respondents. Earlier studies had not identified the specific good or service being considered, with some even mixing consumer and industrial products, and had used respondents obtained from different contact lists in each country. While vendor selection differences were found in these studies, it was not possible to identify the causes of these differences. The methodology used in this study allowed the research to attribute differences in the perceived importance of vendor selection criteria to cultural dimensions.

This research has several limitations that should be considered. First, the service being studied is customized intellectual property legal software. It cannot be assumed that the results of the study can be applied to other services without future research, as Park, Krishman and Lee (2012) have found that vendor selection criteria differ by industry. Second, this study includes organizations located in the United States and Germany. Again, the results of the study cannot be generalized to other countries without further research. Finally, this study limits the focus to culture in regard to the impact on the perceived importance of vendor selection criteria across countries. While a review of the literature and discussions with industry experts did not uncover any other factors, there is the possibility of other factors impacting the perceived importance of vendor selection criteria across countries.

This research highlights the need for additional research in the area. The study measured the perceived importance of vendor selection factors in regard to the purchase of computer software. It would be of interest to see if similar results are found when examining vendor selection in regard to other services and goods. There is a need to further study differences in vendor selection criteria for individual services and goods, as much of the earlier research in the field has not identified the exact service or good being purchased. This study identified a relationship between individual(s) levels of uncertainty avoidance and individualism, and the perceived importance of vendor selection factors in the United States and Germany. This research should be expanded to other countries to determine if the findings can be generalized beyond these two countries. Many other countries have been found to have greater cultural dimension differences than the United States and Germany (Hofstede 1980), and it would be of interest to see if these cultural differences impact the perceived importance of vendor selection factors in these countries. In short, this study is a beginning in examining the relationship of culture to international buyer behavior. However, there is much room for expansion, as it would be interesting to explore if the findings hold for other countries, products and steps in the buying process.

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BIOGRAPHY

Jerrold A. Van Winter, Ph.D., assistant professor of marketing, earned a doctorate in marketing from The George Washington University, with a secondary concentration in organization behavior. His areas of interest include international marketing, services marketing and marketing strategy. Van Winter started his career in the telecommunications industry, and later served as first director of marketing and then president of a several hundred employee computer software company. He currently teaches and consults in both the marketing and management areas. He can be reached at Hood College, Department of Economics and Management, 401 Rosemont Ave., Frederick, MD 21701, vanwinter@hood.edu

Marilyn Liebrezn-Himes, PhD, an Associate Professor of Global Marketing, earned her Doctorate at Michigan State University with a concentration in Marketing, and supporting fields in International Business, Advertising, and Economics. Her research interests include mobile and social media/network marketing, customer relationship management, brand strategy, macro marketing, and marketing history. Her key courses include Marketing Management, Marketing Strategy, International Marketing, and Services Marketing She has conducted more than 100 seminars in management and marketing techniques from supervisory level through upper level management. Dr. Liebrezn-Himes has been active in a number of professional associations in the metro Washington, DC area, and, in 2012, was awarded the O'Hara Leadership Award from the Direct Marketing Association of Washington Educational Foundation, the top academic award from that organization. Married with four sons ranging from ages in the 40s to 20s, she and her husband live near Annapolis, MD, where they are also sponsors for midshipmen from the Naval Academy. She can be contacted at The George Washington University, School of Business, Department of Marketing, 2201 G. St. NW, Suite 301, Washington, DC 20052, liebrezn@gwu.edu.