

The impact of creativity on performance in non-profits

Hilton Barrett^{1*}, Joseph L. Balloun² and Art Weinstein²

¹Elizabeth City State University, North Carolina, USA

²Nova Southeastern University, Florida, USA

- *This article examines how creative climate affects learning orientation and its relationship to organizational performance. The study also assesses creativity's link with market orientation, entrepreneurial orientation, and organizational flexibility. Past research on creativity climate has explored areas such as the arts, high-tech, information technology, media, and the sciences. The focus of this study is to assess creativity's role in managerial decision-making in the non-profit sector. Sound use of creativity can improve planning, implementation, and control by non-profit organization executives.*

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Introduction

The non-profit sector exists because it can better provide, relative to the business and public sectors, goods, and services that: (1) have a significant degree of non-rivalry, and (2) are difficult to charge an economically appropriate price (Ben-Ner, 2002). Hence, non-profits are most appropriate to provide needed societal services when traditional market mechanisms fail (Sargeant *et al.*, 2002).

Examples of non-profits range from blood banks to educational institutions to sports organizations to soup kitchens. Worldwide, the non-profit sector generates well over one trillion dollars US, annually. It is big and it is important—a minor change in the productivity and performance of the sector can result in a major change in national economies and the quality of life/well-being of the populace.

The major portion of the non-profit sector varies greatly by nation and culture. In the United States, health and education are the major emphases; in Latin America, education; in central Europe, recreation and culture; and in Western Europe, social services and education. In the Johns Hopkins Comparative Non-profit Sector Project covering central and western Europe, Latin America, and several developed countries, Ireland and the Netherlands have over 12% of their non-agricultural employment in the non-profit sector; the US, 8.8%; the UK, 6.4%, Argentina, 4.4%, and Romania, 0.6% (Salamon *et al.*, 1999).

Purpose of the study

Most of the previous research on creativity has emphasized the individual. Recently, there has been a growing interest in the organizational entity and how it can facilitate individual and group creativity.

Unfortunately, much of the empirical research on organizational creativity has been limited to specialized areas such as information

*Correspondence to: Hilton Barrett, Davis School of Business & Economics, Elizabeth City State University, Elizabeth City, NC 27909, USA.
E-mail: hbarrett@mail.ecsu.edu

technology, life sciences, the performing and visual arts, or research and development activities. Ford and Gioia (2000) call for increased research in the managerial domain. The limited attention to creativity in non-profit organizations was an impetus for our research investigation.

This exploratory study examines the factors for successful organizational performance (PERF) with respect to managerial activities such as market orientation (MKTOR), learning orientation (LRNOR), entrepreneurship (ENT), and organizational flexibility (ORGF) in the non-profit organization (NPO) environment. Creative climate (CRC) is our focal variable for analysis.

While a strong research tradition relating these factors to performance exists within the business sector, the non-profit sector has only recently attracted attention from researchers. Best examines entrepreneurial management within New Zealand public libraries (Best, 2001). Gonzalez *et al.* (2002) examine market orientation within non-profits and the resulting relationships with both clients and donors.

Because of the vast changes in internal and external environments, management teams need to better determine what are today's (and tomorrow's) critical success factors (CSF) for their organizations. In addition, management needs to be able to influence the development and execution of these factors within their organizations.

This research project assesses the impact of specific management-controlled variables (CRC, MKTOR, LRNOR, ENT, and ORGF) as CSFs within NPO organizations in key sectors (health care and education). Specifically, it considers three research questions (RQ) as follows:

RQ₁: (a) Are these factors (CRC, MKTOR, LRNOR, ENT, and ORGF) correlated with each other?

(b) Do the factors in RQ₁ (a) increase organizational performance (PERF)?

RQ₂: Is the relationship between creative climate and performance direct or indirect?

RQ₃: Is there evidence that the core relationships of the factors defined in RQ₁ and RQ₂ differ between non- and for-profit organizations?

Overview of the literature

A paradigm shift in decision-making

Non-profit, as well as business and public sector organizations are facing a sea change of technology advancements, new regulations, globalization, obsolescence of products, and hyper-competition (D'Aveni, 1994). Religious organizations are losing membership as younger generations see less relevancy in worship attendance, and affiliation. Colleges and universities add distance education to their programs as the Internet allows students to learn outside of the classroom. Healthcare institutions are facing financial crunches due to decreasing occupancy rates—medical advances and insurance guidelines mean shorter hospital stays and less revenue. Lower interest rates lead to decreased cash flow from endowments and fewer resources for ongoing operations for a myriad of non-profits.

In the new economy, management teams in virtually all organizations are facing increased challenges due to changing competitors, value chain members, regulators, and technologies. This is forcing a change in how managers make decisions. In general, managers base their decisions on their experiences and knowledge and adopt and adapt yesterday's solutions to today's problems.

Managers generally prefer safe decisions. For years, the byline for buying computer technology was 'no one ever got fired for buying IBM computers.' This belief helped sell a lot of IBM computers. What worked in the past no longer is sufficient. In the 21st century, today's problems and opportunities have few benchmarks for decision guidance.

Decision-making is using critical thinking skills to optimize a decision—it is also recognized as a problem (or opportunity) solving process. Historically, the analytical phase of this process has been stressed. Nutt (1984) found that in 85% of the management decisions

studied, there was no generation of alternatives and very little use of creative thinking. Because of the acceleration of environmental change, this is no longer sufficient; we need an earlier phase to develop potential, feasible choices for further analysis.

The use of creative thinking skills and capabilities must be encouraged and stimulated. Realize that MBA-trained managers are generally more risk-averse than entrepreneurs (or intrapreneurs). To foster creativity, the work environment needs to support risk-taking and allow for the occasional failure (Sternberg *et al.*, 1997).

Creative climate

While there are varying definitions for creativity, there is general agreement that creativity has novelty and usefulness (Gryskiewicz, 1987). From a marketing perspective, the outcome of creativity is a differentiated product that has superior value to customer/client groups (target markets).

In an overview of creativity and what it entailed, Rhodes (1961) described four overlapping themes:

- Characteristics for personal creativity (e.g., curiosity, openness),

- Creative process (e.g., properly defining problem or opportunity),
- Outcomes or products (e.g., focus on clients', donors', ultimate users' needs),
- Context or climate (e.g., workplace that encourages individual, group, and organizational creativity).

At the organizational level, creativity is a multidimensional construct and involves the interaction of individuals, groups, and the organization itself. At times, it resembles an experiment in chaos theory.

Isaksen (1984) developed a visual model in which person, process, and product of Rhodes (1961) was integrated within the context or creative climate (see **Figure 1**). Within the creative climate then are those activities, positive and negative, which influence the person's personal creativity, the creative process or operation, and the outcome or product. The better that managers understand how creative climate influences decisions, the better they can develop and influence performance within organizations. Therefore, creative climate can be viewed as a management-controlled factor.

Amabile (1997, 1998) in her well-known componential model emphasizes that individual creativity depends on the person's

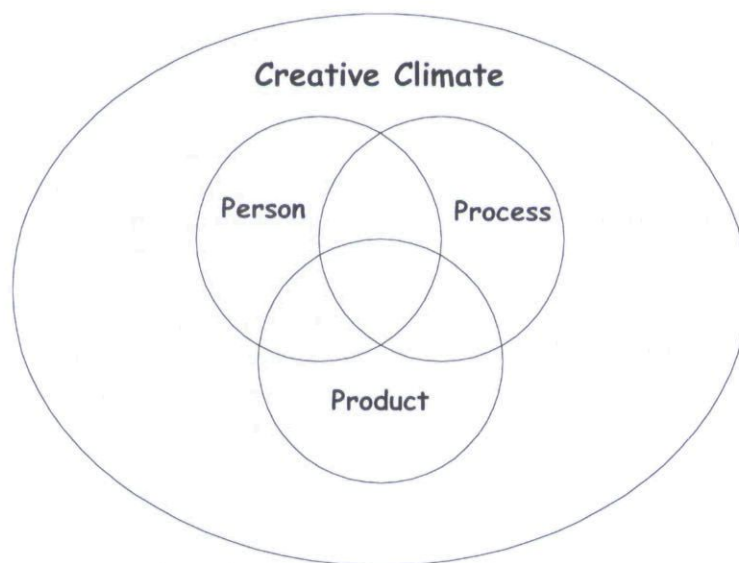


Figure 1. The 3Ps within the creative climate.

expertise, thinking skills, and intrinsic motivation. While extrinsic motivation (or creative climate) is not a part of the model, she recognizes that it can also be a positive factor through six managerial influenced factors in the workplace:

1. Challenges that stimulate;
2. Freedom or autonomy to manage the creative process;
3. Adequate resources such as time and budget;
4. Work-group features such as diverse perspectives;
5. Supervisory encouragement, acceptance of failure as learning experience and openness; and
6. Organizational support, broad based support for creative efforts.

Other research studies have recognized a host of attributes of a positive creative climate. These are: performance standards (Bower, 1965); open information exchange (Amabile, 1988); supportive of risk-taking (Sternberg *et al.*, 1997); diversity of perspectives, learning and application of creative problem-solving tools and skills, mutual respect for individual's work, reasonable toleration of disorder, collaborative relationships (Isaksen *et al.*, 2000); playfulness, non-personal conflict, debate of ideas (Isaksen *et al.*, 1999), and management encouragement (Anderson *et al.*, 1992).

In addition, Woodman *et al.* (1993) developed a three-phase process, an interactionist model of organizational creativity. The phases were sequentially: individual, group, and organizational creativity. The model used a total of eleven variables. Only creative context was a major influence in each phase.

Hence, this research builds upon the past studies and models, which demonstrated that individuals' creative activities are transformed through the facilitating creative climate into meaningful organizational performance.

Research approach

The scope of the study, sampling approach, and measurement issues, are discussed in this section.

Scope of the study

Previous research on the variables assessed in this study has emphasized a single activity, manufacturing (Naman and Slevin, 1993; Zahra and Covin, 1995; Barrett and Weinstein, 1998). As part of an ongoing stream of work; we developed a comprehensive database that includes not only manufacturing, but also service businesses and non-profit organizations. In this study, NPOs are the focus of our investigation. For this study, non-profits include both traditional '501' organizations (e.g., private colleges or hospitals), as well as state and local government organizations such as universities and libraries.

The study departed from the usual method of research with a single respondent from an organization. It incorporated a multiple response methodology to include numerous perspectives of how the organization is perceived, or rated, on each of the five factors and its performance. Survey research using more than one respondent per organization is rare, but important. The only notable research is in operations management strategy that incorporates two or three respondents from the same organization (Boyer and Verma, 2000; Boyer and Lewis, 2002). Numerous articles in the genre have noted the need for using multiple, instead of single, respondents (Gray *et al.*, 1998; Dawes, 2000; Tsai, 2002).

The sample

The study used a snowball sampling technique. According to Churchill (1995), the snowball sample is a judgment approach that is useful for sampling special populations. He adds, "This sample relies on the researcher's ability to locate an initial set of respondents with desired characteristics... those initially asked to participate would also be asked for others whose cooperation would be solicited. Thus, the sample 'snowballs' by getting larger as participants identify still other possible respondents (p. 19)."

The process began by soliciting the members of associations, contacting members of personal

networks, and targeting particular non-profit organizations. The resulting non-probabilistic sample consisted of 267 usable individual responses within twenty-three NPOs of two different sectors (health care and education).

As to size of these organizations, nine were considered 'large' employing 500 or more individuals and fourteen were 'medium' employing between 100–499 people. All the participants were from five southeastern states—Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee.

Measurement

A 7-point Likert scale is used for all questions. The resulting measures are the average of the questions in each of the six construct sets. Given the broadness of the topics and multiple respondent participation within organizations, the resulting 71-question survey gave us the needed data, yet did not overly burden respondents. Further details on the measures are as follows:

- Creative climate (CRC). Does the internal climate facilitate the use of creativity by individuals and teams to accomplish the goals and objectives of the organization? Studies by a number of researchers have shown a large number of activities that facilitate (collaboration among departments, sense of urgency and enthusiasm, appropriate feedback) or impede (overly bureaucratic, emphasis on status quo) the creative works (Ekvall, 1983; Burnside *et al.*, 1998). Creative climate is measured using the eighteen positive questions of Biech's (1996) creativity climate survey. The questions emphasize a number of attributes deemed contributing to creativity such as openness; diversity; adequate resources; and management respect, encouragement, and trust.
- Market orientation (MKTOR). Jaworski and Kohli (1993) stated market orientation has three components: generation of market intelligence, sharing of this knowledge throughout the organization, and a marketing

response mechanism. Narver and Slater (1990) defined MKTOR as having three tenets: customer orientation, competitive orientation, and interfunctional coordination. For non-profits, customer may also mean client, patron, student, patient, or similar term. Market orientation is different for non-profits than for business (Liao *et al.*, 2000; Gonzalez *et al.*, 2002; Sargeant *et al.*, 2002). However, since we are comparing various factors of organizations with performance, we need to have the same definition, the same construct for non-profits. Therefore, we are using the 20-question market orientation construct developed by Kohli *et al.* (1993).

- Learning orientation (LRNOR). Learning orientation denotes that not only do individuals in an organization have and use the ability to do both adaptive (incremental) and generative (paradigm shift) learning; but also, keep an open mind as to different perspectives and have a commitment to learning (Senge, 1990; Baker and Sinkula, 1999). When correctly practised, the norm becomes collaborative learning. In their studies of organization rejuvenation, Stopford and Baden-Fuller (1994) established that the development of a learning organization required flexibility and internal communication to achieve an effective market orientation. Slater and Narver (1995, p. 67) stated 'a market orientation is inherently a learning orientation.' Learning orientation is measured using Yim-Teo's (2002) 10-question construct.
- Entrepreneurship (ENT). Entrepreneurial management style, corporate entrepreneurship, and entrepreneurial orientation are terms used to define an organization (non- or for-profit) that acts entrepreneurially (Covin and Slevin, 1989; Dess and Lumpkin, 2005). ENT is an organizational process that encourages and practices: innovation, risk-taking, and proactiveness toward customers (clients or patrons), competition, and opportunities (Miller and Friesen, 1982). The process enables the organization to create value by identifying market opportunities

and creating unique combinations of resources to pursue these opportunities (Jacobson, 1992). Thus, there is a relationship between the dimensions of ENT and the marketing activities of the organization. Hence, the organization: (1) is proactive in obtaining intelligence on customers and competitors, (2) is innovative by reconfiguring its resources to formulate a strategic response, and (3) implements the response, which, because it is different, entails some degree of risk and uncertainty. Entrepreneurial orientation is measured using Covin and Slevin's (1989) nine-question construct.

- Organizational flexibility (ORGF). Flexibility is defined as the degree in which an organization is adaptable in administrative relations and the authority vested in situational expertise (a form of empowerment). The term organic is used to define such attributes (Khandwalla, 1997). The management theorist Mary Parker Follet, in the 1920s, emphasized the need to match an organic structure to what is now considered an entrepreneurial management style (Graham, 1995). Organizational flexibility is measured using a seven-question Khandwalla (1997) instrument.
- Performance (PERF). Because of the difficulty of obtaining comparability for performance, we used a qualitative-based, two-question instrument developed by Jaworski and Kohli (1993). This scale assesses: (1) how well the organization did this year versus last year, and (2) how well it did versus leading competitors or similar organizations. These two judgmental questions result in a subjective rating of business performance. However, given the difficulties in obtaining correct financial information that is of similar nature and period among respondents, as well as the outright refusal by many to release such information, subjective measures are often more useful than objective financial information (Sandberg and Hofer, 1987; Naman and Slevin, 1993). Providing further support, the Cronbach alpha for the construct developed by these two questions was 0.82.

Research findings

Data screening and reliability

The data were reviewed for normality, outliers, and non-response bias. Correlating factor scores within organizations with response latencies within organizations tested the possibility of non-response bias. The within-organization factor scores were not significantly correlated with the corresponding response latencies. The correlations of factor scores with response latency were close to zero. They ranged from -0.06 to 0.00 with a median of -0.02 .

As for testing reliability, all of the Cronbach alphas well exceeded Nunnally's (1978) minimum requirement of 0.70. Computed reliabilities were: CRC 0.94, MKTOR 0.92, LRNOR 0.91, ENT 0.90, ORGF 0.82, and PERF 0.82. The reliability coefficients were significantly greater than zero at the 0.05 level (Feldt *et al.*, 1987). Coefficient alpha can be high where the variables in a factor measure two or more separate latent dimensions (Peter, 1979; Cortina, 1993). Therefore, analysis the items within each factor was done by principal components analysis. Each factor is uni-dimensional by Lautenschlager's tables (Lautenschlager, 1989).

Statistical analysis

RQ₁. Correlations among the CSF and performance

As shown in **Table 1**, the critical success factors—creative climate, market orientation, learning orientation, entrepreneurship, and organizational flexibility—were highly correlated with each other ($p < 0.01$). Furthermore

Table 1. Pearson correlations from NPO executives

<i>n</i> = 267	CRC	ENT	LRNOR	MKTOR	ORGF	PERF
CRC	1	0.20*	0.65*	0.33*	0.21*	0.28*
ENT		1	0.29*	0.49*	0.37*	0.40*
LRNOR			1	0.46*	0.21*	0.36*
MKTOR				1	0.23*	0.57*
ORGF					1	0.18*
PERF						1

*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (one-tailed).

these independent variables were highly correlated with the dependent variable, performance, as well ($p < 0.01$). This was expected as both theory and practice show the needed integration and interdependency among these factors.

RQ₂: The relationship between creative climate and performance

Eskildsen *et al.* (1999) using a sample of European businesses, did an empirical study of the relationships among creative organization (similar to our CRC), learning organization (similar to our LRNOR) and business excellence (similar to our PERF). Each of the constructs was different, but the concept of relationships was similar, as were the results. The European study showed the relationship between creative organization and learning organization was stronger than either the relationship between creative organization and business excellence, or the relationship between learning organization and business excellence.

This study found similar results. As Table 1 showed, the relationship between creative climate and learning orientation ($r = 0.65$) is stronger than both the relationship between creative climate and performance ($r = 0.28$), and the relationship between learning orientation and performance ($r = 0.36$).

Creativity emphasizes generative learning and the learning orientation emphasizes both adaptive and generative learning. Thus, the greater power is that of a learning orientation (Senge, 1990; Baker and Sinkula, 1999). As Amabile (1997, 1998) explained, a creative climate is a facilitator of innovative thinking and the learning orientation of an organization. The findings show, using the technique advocated by Eskildsen *et al.* (1999), that a creative climate is positively related to organizational performance, and it acts through the learning orientation of the organization. Based on these findings and insights from related work (Barrett *et al.*, 2004), progressive non-profits use these critical success factors in a similar manner as their business counterparts; and, they are

equally successful in building and using a creative climate and learning orientation.

Furthermore, a combining of these results with those reported by Eskildsen *et al.* (1999) for 202 European executives was performed. After appropriately weighting the data for sampling variation and measurement error, the following correlations were found: LRNOR correlates 0.69 with PERF, CRC and PERF correlate 0.49, and LRNOR and CRC correlate 0.70. The pooled sample size is 469 for our study and theirs together. The one-tailed *t*-test for the difference between the LRNOR-PERF and CRC-PERF correlations is 7.70, which is significant at well beyond the 0.001 level. CRC correlates with LRNOR and is likely to be a precursor of LRNOR. But LRNOR correlates substantially more with business performance than does CRC. CRC seems to affect performance indirectly by its likely influence on LRNOR. This supports the proposition that creative climate is a facilitator of learning orientation.

RQ₃. Differences between non- and for-profit Organizations

Using comparative data from a study by Barrett *et al.* (2004) that examined and compared non- and for-profits, there was little mean difference between business and non-profits on the critical success factors. None of the factors are statistically different even at a conservative 0.10 level of significance. Within both groups, NPOs and for-profit enterprises, the MKTOR factor had the highest correlation with performance ($r = 0.48$ and $r = 0.57$, respectively).

There is, however, an important difference in reported performance as shown in boldface type in Table 2 (data extracted from Barrett *et al.*, 2004). Business respondents tend to have a greater self-rated performance than

Table 2. Mean sector differences—CSF and performance

Individuals	CRC	ENT	ORGF	MKTOR	LRNOR	PERF
Businesses	4.73	4.04	3.98	4.60	4.35	5.18
Non-profits	4.82	4.03	4.10	4.63	4.47	4.86
Absolute Δ	0.09	0.01	0.12	0.03	0.12	0.32*

*Significant at the 0.001 level.

respondents from non-profits ($t=3.42$, $p < 0.001$). The initial interpretation was that businesses were obtaining greater output from the same inputs of the five critical factors — i.e., non-profits were not as effective in their deployment of these management activities. Or perhaps, do non-profits view performance with a different reference frame? A number of articles support this perspective (Gonzalez *et al.*, 2002; Sargeant *et al.*, 2002).

Discussion of findings and implications for managers

This empirical study helped to better understand and compare several management-controlled factors in the non-profit sector. The study shows that CRC, as well as MKTOR, ENT, ORGF, and LRNOR are complementary for better organizational performance. All five of these critical success factors are positively, highly correlated to organizational performance.

Research evidence suggests, however, that creative climate is facilitated through learning orientation. These findings have great relevance to non-profit organizational strategists because each of these factors is controllable by management and organization cultures can be developed that stimulate the implementation of these components.

Findings advocate the need for non-profit organizations to:

- Develop their creative climate and learning orientation with the understanding that the former reinforces and leverages the latter
- Continually scan their environments for relevant market information, act upon that information and disseminate this knowledge throughout the organization
- Act proactively to use this knowledge as a starting point to introduce new, novel programs to benefit their clients, customers, and/or patrons
- Use cross-functional, empowered teams to analyze, create and develop, and execute strategic marketing responses into increasingly dynamic environments.

This process provides insight, planning, and guidance on how to better manage 21st century organizations.

It is most encouraging to find that many non-profit organizations have embraced the universality of CRC, MKTOR, ENT, ORGF, and LRNOR. In this study, there is no statistical difference between the levels of each of these factors between businesses and non-profits. The fact that businesses do generate statistically higher performances with similar levels of these variables indicates that either: (1) the business sector is more skillful and productive in their use of these critical factors, or (2) performance has a higher priority than with non-profits.

Either or both give a strong signal to non-profit management that their executive teams need to be more focused on performance results. Because of the often, ambiguous nature of their organizational missions, this may be more difficult to accomplish within non-profits than with businesses. Furthermore, due to their inherent financials-driven mentality, for-profit enterprises have been held accountable by their stakeholders to perform well. Hence, they have utilized strategic marketing and management principles (including creativity climate, market orientation, learning orientation, entrepreneurship, and organizational flexibility) for a long time to achieve business objectives.

Concluding remarks and creativity-based research agenda

Non-profits constitute a major sector in industrialized countries of the world. As newly emerging and developing countries' economies and societies evolve, non-profits will grow in importance as a vehicle for improving both the standard of living and quality of life for citizens. An enhanced creative climate will increase the performance of non-profit organizations.

NPOs have not received the necessary attention for an activity generating over one trillion U.S. dollars each year (and growing) to the world economy. The research study

generated three recommendations for additional research initiatives:

1. *Greater reciprocal learning* by both the business and non-profit sectors. Obviously non-profits have learned how to use the five management-controlled factors (CRC, ENT, MKTOR, LRNOR, and ORGF) effectively. These are universal critical success factors for an organization regardless of profit orientation. Businesses can learn from non-profits just as non-profits have been learning from the larger sector. Possibilities in this latter area may include dealing with multiple stakeholders, budget constraints, managing public relations, and new program development.
2. Additional research is called for in the growing area of *social entrepreneurship*. This is an amalgamation of both sectors and is a harbinger of new organization forms, missions, and visions. In a broad sense, any organization, business or non-profit, that has both an entrepreneurial orientation and a primary emphasis on its social mission rather than profitability is practicing social entrepreneurship.
3. *New teaching directions which would include a focus on non-profit management and creativity* at the undergraduate and graduate level. Progressive business professors acknowledge the universality of management and marketing principles in both profit and non-profit settings. Research on the growing and important non-profit sector should be encouraged to help disseminate new knowledge to future leaders. Similarly, we now realize that both the analytical (left brain dominance) and creative (right brain dominance) aspects of critical thinking are necessary for optimal decision-making, regardless of sector. Business education has notoriously stressed the analytical approach at the expense of the creative side. Creativity can be the difference maker in advertising, entrepreneurship, and even strategic planning. Further research on brain lateralization theory (de Bono, 1970) should be encouraged. Per-

haps, the next wave of truly new ideas in management emerges not from information technology, operations management, or marketing, but rather from understanding the cognitive and creative processes of individuals and managers.

Biographical notes

Hilton Barrett, D.B.A., is an Associate Professor of Business at Elizabeth City State University. He has nearly 30 years of experience as an entrepreneur and a corporate executive in a Fortune 500 firm. He has published extensively in trade journals and his academic publications include *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*, *Entrepreneurial Theory and Practice*, and *International Journal of Business Disciplines*.

Joseph L. Balloun, PhD., is the Professor of Research and Statistics at Nova Southeastern University. He has published extensively on social science research methods, statistical techniques, and developing information systems in such journals as *Information Resources Management Journal*, *International Journal of Information Management*, *SAM Advanced Management Journal*, and *Project Management Journal*.

Art Weinstein, PhD., is the Professor and Chair of Marketing at Nova Southeastern University. He is the author of *Handbook of Market Segmentation* and *Superior Customer Value in the New Economy*. He has also published in *Entrepreneurial Theory and Practice*, *Journal of Marketing Education*, *Journal of Small Business Management*, and other leading publications.

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