Introduction

I watched a film called Two for the Money for my experiential activity. The stars of the movie are Al Pacino and Matthew McConaughey. Pacino plays a man named Walter who owns and operates the largest sports betting advisory company in the world, based out of Los Angeles. McConaughey plays the part of Brandon Lang, a former college athlete who was injured and became a “sports handicapper” for a newspaper in Las Vegas. Essentially, his job is to look at the lines for games in Las Vegas and pick who will win, the spread, and so on for sports betters.

Walter offers Brandon a job working for his company as a handicapper and salesperson. In this position, Brandon’s job is basically to pick games and then convince clients of Walter’s company to bet as much money as possible on those picks.

Portrayal of the Business World

The business world in this film was portrayed in a very negative way. As I mentioned, the plot is based on sports betting in Las Vegas and Los Angeles, so obviously there is going to be some shady activity going on. The primary goal of everyone involved in the business that Walter is operating is to make as much money as possible, regardless of consequences.

The film does a lot to point out extreme differences between being at the top of a business and being at the bottom. For example, in the beginning of the film, when Brandon is working as a handicapper in Las Vegas, he is making virtually no money. In fact, he asks his boss for a raise to $12/hour, which his boss rejects because he “doesn’t even make that much.” Brandon is also living with his mom and younger sibling, even though he is obviously in his
early to mid-thirties. In this way, the movie clearly demonstrates that Brandon is at the bottom of the totem pole and is struggling just to get by.

When Brandon goes to meet Walter for the first time, we see the opposite end of the spectrum. Walter, being the owner of the business, has an amazing office and a ton of money. Whereas Brandon was working in a cubicle, Walter has five large flat screen televisions throughout his office. When Brandon first meets him, Walter is on the phone with Barnum and Bailey circus negotiation the price of renting an elephant for his daughter’s birthday party.

Basically, the movie demonstrates that work brings money and money brings power. During that same phone call, Walter actually states that “everything is about money.” Initially, Brandon is skeptical to accept this lifestyle, but once he starts making some money, he becomes the exact same as Walter. He forgets about who he actually is and cares solely about making as much money as he can. There is a part later in the film that demonstrates this very strongly. Brandon is on the phone with a client who wants to bet $20,000 on one game. He is angrily trying to convince the client to bet $75,000, all the while he is getting fitted for a new custom business suit. Then his mom calls and eventually hangs up on him because his personality is so different now that she can’t talk to him. Overall, the movie basically demonstrates that the people in the business world who have money are greedy and care only about themselves.

Marketing Ethical Dilemma #1

The first marketing ethical dilemma that I found in this movie is extremely obvious; that being whether or not it is ethical to try to convince people to gamble, especially with more money than they think they can afford. Like I said, Brandon’s job throughout his time with Walter is to pick games and convince clients to bet as much money as possible on those games.
This dilemma is a great example of the idea of overconsumption. If the clients of this company have a set amount of money that they feel they can bet, is it ethical to try to convince them to bet more? The problem was that, not only was Brandon trying to convince clients to bet more, but he was trying to get them to bet way more than they originally intended. For example, early in the film, a client calls Brandon intending to bet $1,000; Brandon convinces him to bet $20,000. Obviously, that is far more than the client wanted to bet, and there is probably a reason for that: he couldn’t afford it.

This issue was eventually resolved, at least in Brandon’s case, at the end of the film when he chose to leave the company. Near the end of the football season, Brandon started losing people a ton of money. As Walter puts it, there were “men on the phone crying with their wives yelling at them in the background.” Soon after this part, after another big loss, Brandon leaves the company and goes back home to Las Vegas.

I believe Brandon resolved the issue correctly, though he did it far later than I think I would have. In fact, I don’t know that I would have taken the job in the first place, once I had figured out what it was all about. During their first couple of meetings, Walter made two statements to Brandon that I think would have made me back out of the position. The first thing he said was “In 48 states, sports betting is illegal. What we do is not.” I think that would be a red flag for me that this might not be something I wanted to get involved in. Soon after, when explaining to Brandon how to make a sale, Walter says “The only thing we have to know about our clients is that they’re in a hole. The second they call, you got ‘em. Get to the point: you’re above them. Let ‘em know it. Let ‘em feel it.” Again, I think this would deter me from moving on with this position.

**Marketing Ethical Dilemma #2**
Another significant marketing ethical dilemma in the film involved the concept of deceptive marketing. Obviously, in order to convince people to bet substantially more than they wanted, the salespeople had to have a very strong pitch. Walter’s company has salespeople, advertising, and a television show dedicated to sports betters. All of these aspects of marketing, in this company’s case, are extremely deceptive.

During the television show there were several very deceptive statements made. The show is called “The Sports Advisors.” It stars Walter, Brandon, and two other ‘handicappers’/salesmen giving their pitches to betters throughout Los Angeles. The point of this is to get people to call one of the advisors and get their picks. If the better wins, the company gets a percentage of the winnings. So, as each of the advisors gives his pitch, the deceptive statements just jump out. Some examples are as follows:

- I’m “here to make all your dreams come true.”
- “I’m calling this pick my lock of the decade.”
- “You can bet your children’s children’s unborn children on these picks.”

Obviously, these statements are very deceptive and are nothing more than false promises. It is the advisors’ way to convince the betters that their picks are sure things, so they should bet as much money as they can on those picks. The question here is whether it is ethical to make statements like this to convince people to place bets.

As I mentioned, Brandon walked away in the end, which ultimately solved this dilemma for him. However, he handled this aspect of the job very well throughout the movie. For example, during the first episode of the TV show, Brandon has a script written for his pitch. When it’s his turn, though, he decides not to read the script and instead speak from the heart. He explains to the viewers that he knows the leagues and the game because he played Division I
football. He also explains that he has been picking 80% correctly for over one year, which is true. So, in this way, he did a good job of not being deceptive. Although what he was trying to sell may have been unethical, I don’t think the way he did so was unethical at all. The statements I quoted above were not from Brandon, because he avoided making such statements.

As with the last dilemma, I feel that Brandon handled the situation correctly and ethically. Although the people around him were making false statements to make sales, he stayed true to his pitch and made honest statements. I think that’s the way it should have been handled. In the case of the other advisors, though, I think something should be done on a legal level to stop such deception. The advisors should not feel comfortable in making such unbelievably deceptive statements in order to make sales, especially when they’re trying to sell something that is fairly unethical in the first place.

Marketing Ethical Dilemma #3

The final dilemma relates to our class discussion about whether or not it is ok to “play favorites” in business. In the film, Walter is clearly playing favorites with Brandon when compared to the other advisors, handicappers, and salespeople in the company. This is an ethical dilemma because Brandon has been with the company for a very short period of time, whereas others have been there for many years.

When Brandon takes the position, Walter immediately sets him up with an unbelievable apartment, a new Mercedes, money, expensive dinners, and more. He gives him all of the biggest accounts in terms of sales and commission. Then he gives Brandon the first spot on the TV show even though the other advisors on the show have been doing it for several years. It is clear that Walter is playing favorites and that others in the company are very upset about this. In fact, after a few weeks of Brandon being first on the TV show, one of the other advisors speaks
up and says that he wants to be first because he always has been. In response to this, Walter curses him out and then fires him in front of about thirty people.

On the other side of this issue, though, is that Brandon outperforms everyone else in the company as soon as he starts. So the question is whether or not it is ethical for Walter to give Brandon all of these things because he is the best at the job, even though he just started. Personally, I think it is fair of him to do so, but I can certainly understand why the other advisors would be upset with the way things were working out.

As I said, one of the advisors tried to address the issue and was fired for it. After that, no one wanted to say anything to Walter for fear of losing their job. So, in this situation, the issue really wasn’t resolved beyond the one advisor raising the issue. Personally, I feel that the advisor who raised his concern handled it correctly and I think I would have done the same thing.

**Other Marketing Ethics Issues**

This entire movie was pretty much one big marketing ethics issue. The three I mentioned above are probably the most prominent I think. One other issue that we discussed in class that I found in this movie was the difficulty Brandon had separating his work life from his home life. Although I have been referring to him as Brandon, he actually changes his name to John Anthony when he starts working for Walter (at Walter’s request). In doing this, he was forced to change his entire persona and the manner in which he lived his life.

It was clear throughout the movie that Walter wanted Brandon to basically emulate him and eventually take over his empire. For example, at one point in the movie he tells Brandon that he should forget about his past life and begin his new life with Walter as his image. This was a completely different life than Brandon had always been used to and in doing it he had to make a big decision between his personal life and his work life.
What I Learned

I thought this was actually a very interesting exercise. I have watched this movie probably twenty times in the past and this time it was completely different. I think it was amazing how ethically wrong the business that Walter runs in the film actually is; in my mind the business itself is inherently wrong. So, in that regard I would say that I learned a lot more about the gambling industry and how unethical I think it actually is. The fact that people will try to convince others to spend way more money than they can afford by lying about something that is complete chance is very unethical, I think.

The other and more important thing that I learned from this exercise was that it is very important to stay grounded as my career progresses. Although money is important to me, it is not at the top of my priority list, and I think it’s important for me to remember that. In the film, Brandon completely changed who he was and what he wanted because there was so much money in what he was doing. I do not want to let a promotion or a sale dictate the decisions I make and who I am as a person. I think the film exercise actually helped to drive home the point of the mission statement and sticking to the values that it entails.