

Midwestern Marketing Students Endorse Experiential Learning

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ABSTRACT

Over the years, marketing students at Augustana College, a Midwestern Christian liberal arts institution, have researched, written and presented marketing plans for a variety of clients, ranging from bankers developing new debit products to be distributed through third-party retailers to notoriously underfunded non-profit organizations such as the Fellowship of Christian Athletes seeking more participants.

The professor's nine years of teaching an introductory marketing course have led her to seven conclusions regarding the value of student-produced marketing plans. The value is derived by students in the process they perfect, and also by clients who end up with many viable marketing plans among which to pick and choose. In an effort to test the accuracy of her conclusions, and also to discover whether she could continue to require students to research and write plans while learning marketing concepts (half of the semester's grade depends on this work product, while the remainder of the grade is determined through performance on four exams, small assignments and case studies), the professor surveyed clients and students, past and present. The intention was not to approach collection, organization or analysis from a strict statistical standpoint; rather, the professor wanted specific information that reflected on her past practices and how those should inform the future. The questionnaire asked students specific questions about their experiences, whether they connected with clients' missions, and generally attempted to glean reactions to a fairly rigorous and time-intensive requirement of students enrolled in that first – and sometimes only – college marketing course. Past clients were asked to evaluate the value of the student work they received. In an effort to triangulate data, the professor also averaged grades earned by students who composed non-profit versus for-profit plans.

All in all, survey results showed clients were pleased with the efforts and students encouraged the professor to continue requiring students to research and write marketing plans. Students were ambivalent about whether clients should be chosen on a for-profit or non-profit status, but rather preferred the client be chosen on the basis of a product with which students could connect.

INTRODUCTION

Researching and writing a marketing plan is a difficult assignment for seasoned professionals, much less junior-level marketing students just assimilating the four Ps into their daily lexicon. Teachers oftentimes spend the bulk of the semester on theory and case studies rather than on introducing experiential learning to the syllabus as a way to achieve learning objectives.

Many professors, and this professor in particular, grapple with the vital task of preparing students for careers in a constantly changing and competitive workplace. They have understandably turned to projects designed to turn theory into practice (Gremler 2000). Business programs have traditionally churned out graduates with great quantitative and technical abilities but with little experience in applying and practicing new skills (Louis 1990). Today's escalated business environment requires marketers who can speak, write, think, solve problems and work in teams (Floyd and Gordon 1998). This environment requires professors to engage their students fully in the learning process, which includes assigning responsibility for their decisions (O'Banion 1997).

The environment at Augustana College, a 140-year-old liberal arts institution in the Midwest affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, offers the opportunity for professors O'Banion touts. The college's lone marketing professor followed the findings of a study sponsored by the American Association of Higher Education, the Education Commission of the States, and The Johnson Foundation in respecting diverse talents and fostering a learner-centered environment that encouraged student-faculty contact, cooperation among students, active learning, prompt feedback, setting priorities and meeting high

expectations. This professor also followed one of the college's core values – community – as she reached out to seek businesses that would benefit from student assistance. Each semester a new client was sought and secured, primarily through contacts within the community rather than through a formal vetting process. Over time, it became clear to the professor that a preponderance of needy marketing clients operated in the non-profit sector. But did these non-profit missions engage students and motivate them to perform or were students more pragmatic and interested in the for-profit status?

Following her belief that students can best learn marketing principles by applying them to a particular company and its marketplace challenges, each semester the professor sought out a firm that desperately needed a solid marketing plan and was willing to work with her to develop a SWOT analysis AND agreed to field a constant flow of questions from student teams. Understandably, some students admirably rose to the occasion and worked as teams to produce marketing plans to rival those touted by regional and national marketing firms. Others languished in dysfunctional teams or failed to understand the basic components of a plan. Some could not or would not extend the marketing concepts to a particular problem, or fell into the put-the-whole-budget-into-TV-advertising trap.

EXPERIENTIAL CONCEPTS

Noteworthy for his contributions to service learning scholarship, Ernest Boyer (1987) avers “service introduces students to new people and ideas. It establishes connections between academic life and the larger society” and is inherent to the mission of higher education (215). Vernon and Foster (2002) continue this thinking in their qualitative study of how volunteer activities impact nonprofit agencies. “Research pertaining to service learning as a viable pedagogy for teaching subject material and civic responsibility continues to expand as higher education institutions nationwide look to service learning as a means to enhance both service to the community and student learning” (209).

Judith Munter (2002) believes service learning is a means to better prepare students for the realities of the work world. “In recent years students and administrators have created and sustained a national collegiate movement, linking higher education to what is arguably one of the most popular concepts in America today: service to the community. Service learning is a vehicle for merging service to the community with classroom learning that strengthens both and generates a whole greater than the sum of its parts. Proponents of this movement assert that service is improved by finding its grounding in the curriculum and learning is deepened by expanding the notion of the traditional classroom to include real people and actual situations in the community” (153). Munter asserts that “trends in higher education over the past two decades underline the timeliness of expanding the focus of the teaching/learning process from the individual learner as an empty vessel that the teacher fills with knowledge, to the relationship between those learners and educational institutions with communities and society as a whole” (153).

How much corporate social responsibility is handed down the ranks to students as they pursue service learning? C.B. Bhattacharya and Jagdish Sheth (1996) contend that corporate social responsibility is essentially a contract between a business and the society in which it operates (23). The authors say business school education has an important role to play in strengthening and accelerating the current corporate trend. “The combined forces of the growth of social problems, the heightened social consciousness among today's youth and consumers, and the changing philosophy of corporations, are indicative of a ground swell of societal change that business school educators need to tackle in a more direct fashion” (23). Not only do the authors espouse learning by doing, but they also bluntly state that “we want students to realize that the skills they are learning in the course are a potent way of solving social problems” (24). They, as does the professor in the course at hand, believe that “the increased importance accorded by corporate America to issues of social responsibility has important implications for business school education. Active support for many of the recent initiatives has come from departments such as marketing and human resources” (26).

Bhattacharya and Sheth state they “choose to work with nonprofit organizations because these organizations typically deal with a multitude of societal issues” (27). Furthermore, “students gain a better appreciation of the challenges and constraints facing these organizations. In turn, this creates an understanding of the scope that exists for strengthening the marketing strategies of these organizations and

also makes them realize the intellectual value of the work they do for the organization” (28). These authors readily admit they do not have a mechanism for monitoring the longer term benefits of the experience for either students of participating organizations (29), and the “current reward structure for faculty in some institutions may prove to be a disincentive for undertaking such an exercise.”

Perhaps the most persuasive invective comes from Schwartz, Kassem and Ludwig (1991) as they discuss the incongruence in business school education between “doing what is right” and “doing what it takes to get ahead.” These authors assert that “the key to structuring U.S. business schools for greater social responsibility is to take the desire to get ahead among business students as a given, and to use that desire as a guiding force in the development of structural elements that elicit behaviors that are congruent with social responsibility” (461).

Klink & Athaide (2004) proclaim “service learning may be particularly relevant to marketing courses, given marketing’s interest in social causes” (145). Holly Littlefield of the University of Minnesota (2006) writes of her attempts to link real-world challenges with real-world skills among her students. She believes “larger corporations and even the larger nonprofits really do not need my students’ help. They will be unlikely to actually use any final products that my students create, and they will be less likely to see my students as real partners. Working with a smaller organizations or business allows my students to work jointly with their client to design a project that the client can actually use” (320-321).

SEVEN POINTS OF THE HYPOTHESIS

These popular theory contemplations, along with her history in the classroom, led the professor to formulate this hypothesis: Marketing students at a specific Christian liberal arts college in the Midwest are drawn to the missions and specific marketing problems of non-profit businesses more than they are to market problems experienced by for-profit businesses.

Through two surveys, one directed at former clients and another toward past and present students, was designed to test this hypothesis, cast light on whether to continue the marketing plan requirement and if so, which clients should be enlisted for future courses.

In addition to gathering survey data, this professor chose to triangulate her findings by assessing grades students historically earned when working with non-profits versus for-profit clients.

1. Students rise to the marketing challenge more often when the client faces severe financial challenges.
2. Students are more engaged when working for non-profits than when charged with a for-profit project.
3. Clients willingly assume the tasks of preparing students with market realities, competitive challenges, and product familiarity and make themselves available for questions/discussions about student projects more willingly when they are a non-profit organization.
4. Non-profit clients are more likely to adopt a student-developed plan than a for-profit client, because they can’t afford to hire a marketing firm and because they feel more comfortable taking risks, or they appreciate getting the required thought and attention of students pursuing a private business education.
5. Non-profit clients are more likely to attach value to non-monetary contributions to their organizations, thus lending more credence to student business acumen.
6. Marketing students are much more eager to offer creative solutions to non-profits than to for-profit organizations, presumably because as consumers they’ve unknowingly watched for-profits apply the same tired solutions to marketing problems over the years.

7. Students struggling to fund their own private educations relate to non-profit organizations more readily than to for-profit organizations, primarily because non-profit organizations are headed up by former students with similar interests and may be considered the “underdog” when it comes to consideration by donors.

METHODOLOGY

There were no ANOVA tables, no standard deviations, no regression studies nor concerns about statistical independence. Both client and student surveys were designed without pretesting in order to swiftly collect data on three major points:

1. Did the non-profit or for-profit status of the client impact students’ connections to the client organizations?
2. Did the status and connections impact students' work product?
3. Should authoring a marketing plan continue to be a requirement of the introductory marketing course?

Just over 200 (217) former and current students were randomly selected to receive by mail a four-page, 14-question survey designed to collect quantitative and qualitative information about their experience in writing marketing plans. Additionally, 12 former clients, seven of whom represented local non-profit organizations, received a two-page, eight-question survey designed to measure their satisfaction with student-produced plans.

In order to delve more fully into how well students responded to challenges posed by clients, the professor also chose to examine scores earned on marketing plans over six successive fall semesters, half of them for for-profit and half for non-profit clients.

FINDINGS

Just under 20% of the student population surveyed responded. Generally, students found their clients very helpful or somewhat helpful in providing information and assistance. Only two of 40 student respondents who had developed a plan for a non-profit organization reported they did not connect with the organization’s mission. Half of the respondents said the non-profit status of their client made their project feel more “real” and therefore likely to be adopted.

On the flip side, 27 (67%) students worked on behalf of a for-profit organization. All but six (52%) reported connecting with the organization’s mission while two were unsure if they found the mission meaningful. Eight reported this for-profit status made their project feel more “real” and therefore likely to be adopted while only three said their work didn’t feel important.

The remainder of the questionnaire was designed to collect information about the project itself and whether researching and writing the plan as part of a team was a valuable learning experience, leading to better understanding of marketing concepts. Additionally, the survey asked point-blank whether the professor should continue to include the project in the course.

Because the student survey was designed to collect qualitative data, especially comments about the course's long-term value to students, much space was dedicated to collection of such data. Students complied, offering comments ranging from “It was a pain in the ass” to “It (the marketing plan) was one of the few ‘real world’ experiences that we participated in. Knowing that your plan might actually be used was a huge motivator” to “I remember being motivated to put in lots of extra time researching the market and thinking creatively of ways to get the most out of our marketing budget. It put together business skills learned in several other business and related classes to produce the plan. Working as a team to collaborate

on a project is very much the case in the real world and this project incorporated the team element. (It was) very enjoyable and memorable. I still have the plan!"

Most students who chose to offer comments said they enjoyed networking with community business leaders as well as the preparation researching and writing a marketing plan garnered for similar experiences in graduate school. Perhaps comments such as the following reinforced the importance of stretching students to not only learn marketing concepts, but also to practice applying them to real-life situations at the same time. "I found it very beneficial because I was able to learn every detail of building the marketing plan, and the details are just as important as the main goal." Yet another found the experience valuable in this regard: "It was a great skill practice and (as I later learned) very similar to the 'real world' in regards to analyzing data, working with others and different viewpoints and solving complex problems."

To better understand the distribution of grades based upon client, the professor examined grades earned over six consecutive fall semesters, three of which included non-profit clients and three for-profit clients. She analyzed marketing plan grades assigned to students in each semester. Lows and highs, whether for-profit or non-profit, were remarkably stable through time. Twenty-eight students in the fall of 2004 scored an average of 85.8% in their plan for the Make-A-Wish Foundation, compared with 32 students earning an average of 85.7% for a local company providing telephone, basic and digital cable television, and high-speed internet products.

Perhaps the highest scores related to two products students really understood and to which they could relate; one was for Hot Stuff Pizza (for profit) in the fall of 2001 and the other for the college's Career Center (non-profit) the following fall. Not surprisingly, students performed well, grade-wise, on both projects.

Students were provided with voluminous product information about Hot Stuff Pizza, including pizza sampling, a tour of the production facility, and the product manager's time. Performance on these plans was enhanced by the promise of a plane ticket to any of the contiguous states for the plan judged best by the product manager. Thirty students chose to research and write this plan, averaging 93.6% on their plans. In the fall of 2002, students worked on half of the college's career center, the part of the college dedicated to preparing them for employment. Seventeen students that semester scored an average of 93.5% on their plans.

CONCLUSIONS

The professor chose to view the somewhat limited results as applicable to the general population. She has come to 10 conclusions regarding teaching marketing to junior business majors as a private liberal-arts college in the Midwest as well as how to collect relevant feedback from these students.

1. Mail surveys are now dinosaurs and capture less attention and less valuable information than ever.
2. More than any other factor affecting success of student marketing plans is the students' interest in or affinity for the product. This factor is the most reliable predictor of performance on a student-produced marketing plan.
3. Students must continue to be stretched with experiential learning, not only to build their confidence but also to satisfy employers' needs for college-prepared employees who can think and perform strategically about marketing problems.
4. It isn't too much to ask of Principles of Marketing students to both master marketing principles and learn to apply those principles through preparation of a marketing plan in one semester.

5. Colleges must continue to give back to their communities and requiring students to research, write and present marketing plans is an impactful way to accomplish that.
6. There is nothing like a SWOT analysis to force burgeoning businesspeople to pay attention to current events and changing environmental factors.
7. More than anything else, this professor needs to communicate expected outcomes to students throughout the semester.
8. Marketing plans continue to be learning experiences, but only if the product and/or client interests students. Busy students must continue to have the alternative of spending 20 hours interning with a local business in order to observe how marketing plans are constructed and followed.
9. Annual monitoring of the value of the marketing plan component will bring value to both students and clients, and keep the professor in touch with her students' learning styles.
10. The professor will continue to weight this project as a course concluding activity that is equally equivalent to the combined weight of exams, case studies and in-class activities.

When the time came to select a client for the fall semester following the survey, the professor chose to work with a non-profit regional health care system. The system had just launched a travel clinic, specializing in immunizing travelers against illnesses endemic to particular parts of the world with the assistance of information from the CDC and WHO. Because Augustana College is well known for travel and study abroad opportunities for students, the professor believed marketing students could relate to both the travel component as well as the need to protect oneself against disease offered by the clinic.

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