

TAKING THE EXPERIENTIAL APPROACH TO TEACHING ADVERTISING CAMPAIGNS ANOTHER STEP

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ABSTRACT

This article reviews an approach to teaching advertising campaigns in a College of Business which provides students with the opportunity to experience the subject as completely as possible by structuring the class to go a step beyond the more traditional advertising agency simulation. The pedagogy described requires students to not only plan a promotional campaign for a client, but to implement and evaluate it over the course of a semester. (Note: Tables and figures have not been included due to space limitations.)

BODY

As higher education attempts to deal with increasing criticism and scrutiny about the skill levels of its graduates, teaching methods like "experiential learning" are gaining in popularity to try to meet the demands of industry. Experiential approaches transcend the bounds of books and classrooms by providing students with an educational opportunity to work on a real world problem while on the "practice field". For marketing professors there may be a number of experiential opportunities which can be integrated into the classroom, but perhaps one of the more natural fits is in advertising.

The pedagogy used to expose students to the field of advertising campaigns varies widely by institution, college, department and professor. Though most subjects can be taught from several perspectives, there are a myriad of methods being used to educate students about advertising campaigns in Colleges of Business. Often the approach is applied, although many marketing professors struggle with how students can be given the opportunity to gain practical experience. This article outlines an alternative approach to teaching advertising

campaigns which more closely simulates an advertising agency, and offers some of the advantages to the proposed approach.

Going Beyond Planning

An approach to teaching advertising campaigns which overcomes some of the limitations of the methods just described is to organize the class to simulate the structure of an advertising agency. This includes having departments or groups not only plan the campaign, but also having groups responsible for implementing and evaluating the campaign for a single client. To make such an effort feasible in one semester, it is best if the target audience is on-campus students - essentially, students directing the promotional campaign to other students. The students not only plan the campaign but they must manage it on a day to day basis. This includes purchasing space/time, meeting printer and media deadlines, coordinating the activities associated with sponsoring an awareness-raising event on campus and all the other challenges associated with completing a quality campaign on time and within a budget.

The simulation approach is easiest to manage if there are under 25 students in the class. Currently, a prerequisite to the course described is Advertising and a 3.0 GPA. Given these requirements the class generally has only seniors and graduate students enrolled. Further, each student must interview with the professor before being admitted to the class. The interview allows the professor to gain some insight as to what each student hopes to gain from the class and to which group the student would probably best fit in.

The creative group develops the advertising theme and messages and is responsible for media planning. A sales promotion group develops support materials and/or plans events

which help to accomplish the campaign objectives set by the class and approved by the client. The research team conducts pre- and post- campaign evaluations, and depending on the client, possibly some process evaluation. Obviously, successful completion of all of these activities requires a tremendous amount of communication and coordination among the members of the class.

The class agenda is determined prior to the beginning of the semester based upon decisions made between the professor and the client. A time schedule is agreed to with the client for completion of the preliminary research and dates which require their involvement, such as the presentation in which the students propose their plans for the campaign.

The students are assigned readings on the topics of advertising research, creativity, sales promotion, public speaking and articles related to the client's industry. There are lectures throughout the semester and guests from advertising agencies. The intent of the readings, lectures, and guest visitors is to enhance the learning experience for the student. The students are tested over this material and this allows an objective measure of performance in addition to peer/professor evaluations.

Benefits to the Student

Advantages for the student of the simulation approach are myriad. Perhaps most important is that this approach requires what Livingston (1973) has labeled "operant behavior" from students rather than "respondent behavior". Students are challenged to identify problems and opportunities, to develop a strategy to attain the desired results and to measure the effectiveness of their plan. It is this operant behavior which is most beneficial to students in preparing them for the workplace.

Another important advantage for the student is that they are forced to think creatively, independently and are required to assume a tremendous amount of initiative. These are important qualities for students to develop since potential business employers claim that there is an evident "lack of initiative on the part of students" which causes friction between

potential employers and students (Buckley, Peach & Weitzel, 1989). The students completing the course have a portfolio of an actual campaign they can share with potential employers which goes beyond their academic grades. Portfolios are expected of the art student, photography student and other design students but have not traditionally been utilized by business majors. However, if a business student took a portfolio of their work, such as marketing plans and promotional campaigns, into an interview it could give them a competitive advantage.

Both potential employers and academicians recognize the importance of training students to be effective communicators (Porter & McKibbin 1988; Hite, Bellizzi and McKinley 1987). A survey conducted among employers of large and small organizations found that communication skills have become increasingly important to career success and that ability to communicate is now the most significant factor in employee selection (Clarke & Franklin, 1985). The advertising agency simulation approach gives the students many opportunities to work on and improve their communication skills. Requiring implementation of the campaign demands a substantial amount of writing and oral communication from all students in the class. They must prepare a written plan for the campaign and present it to the client, they must maintain communication with the client throughout the semester, and then they must report the results of the campaign to the client both verbally and in writing.

Not only are students gaining writing and public speaking experience through such a course, they are also learning a tremendous amount about the intricacies of the agency/client relationship through their semester long exposure. Mills, et.al (1991) claim College of Business graduates lack interpersonal skills when they enter the work force - they are equipped with theory and technical skills but without much experience interacting and dealing with others. This campaign approach requires teamwork within and between departments, communications with the client, as well as working with students from outside of the College of Business who often serve as subcontractors. Further, the student develops

an understanding of the functions of the various departments within an advertising agency including sales promotion and research rather than the typical emphasis on the creative department alone.

Benefits to the Client

This experiential relationship between the client and the students is a win-win situation. The client receives more than a plan - they actually get the plan implemented and the results evaluated, relatively inexpensively. The cost to the client to sponsor the class varies depending on their objectives but can be done for as little as \$2000. The money is used for such expenses as newspaper space, radio time, photography, art work, photocopying, posters, video camera rental, and miscellaneous operating expenses. The Professor (professor) allocates the money among the groups depending on the objectives of the campaign and the students are responsible for staying within the budget. The students must be resourceful to create and implement a campaign on such a low budget but this also injects more realism into the project. They often utilize other students, such as photography and graphic art students, to assist with the production of the creative work. This "subcontracting" is logical since the marketing major is not likely to be in a future employment position which requires them to perform these functions, yet they will benefit from understanding the process and managing these activities. Further, if some of the students in the class do want to gain experience with these activities they have the option of taking over these tasks. One factor that keeps cost down is that since the campaign is an educational endeavor, college newspapers often give the class a discounted student rate on advertising space. If a company tried to implement the campaign on its own, it would be substantially more expensive.

There are many other factors which could either increase or decrease the cost to the client. For example, if the client is not interested in sponsoring an awareness-raising event to take place on campus, then more money can be appropriated for the creative team. Or, if the research needed is minimal, the students of the research team might be

allocated less money. In any case, the proposed structure must be flexible to accommodate client needs. Ideally, these factors should be planned prior to the beginning of the class so that all the students are kept busy as consistently as possible, which may sometimes require movement between teams.

The experiential learning approach was recently used and evaluated in a business marketing class at Cornell University with very favorable client results (Dev, 1990). Clients claimed that they had benefitted from the experience of working with the students and they cited such advantages as "receiving new ideas and information, operable strategies, time savings and increased awareness of the importance of marketing communications plans". The project at Cornell was limited to student/client planning. When a project is actually implemented and evaluated for a client the benefits become even more tangible. Clients can literally take the strategies and the creative work developed if they proved effective on one campus and implement the campaign on other campuses across the country.

Client and student evaluations for the course described have consistently been extremely positive. Clients are usually surprised with the quality of the students work and the professionalism of the students in their interaction.

Limitations to the Agency Simulation Approach

Participating in a class such as this can be an extremely effective learning experience as well as one of the most intrinsically rewarding classes of a marketing student's program. Yet there are disadvantages as well. For the professor, the time commitment is greater than for many other courses. Each semester brings a new client and with that client comes an entirely new set of objectives, strategies and personalities. There is also the additional time involved in recruiting clients to sponsor the class. Further, coordinating the project and keeping it on track requires tracking a tremendous number of details. Students' individual needs and experiences must be considered to ensure that they are placed in the most appropriate department. Once the teams are established, it is important for everyone to

understand each group's responsibilities and to ensure that everyone is aware of the activities and progress of the other departments so that their efforts are complimentary and synergistic.

Though not a unique consideration to this course, evaluation of student performance is another challenge for the professor. The majority of a student's grade is determined by four peer/professor evaluations throughout the semester. Each student is evaluated by the other members of their team according to criteria provided by the professor. The evaluations are anonymous, however, average scores by category (i.e. "quality work") will be shared with the student as well as the professor's evaluation. Also, there are a number of quizzes and assignments throughout the semester which provide a more objective measure of knowledge.

For students a disadvantage of the course may be that it is more time intensive than more traditional classes. The class must move along at a rapid pace to complete quality work within one semester. Unfortunately, it is difficult to spread the workload evenly throughout the semester for all groups which may result in more work at the beginning and end of the course. Some students may not be comfortable assuming the responsibilities a class such as this requires and others may not be strong group contributors which is a very important component to the success of a project such as this. Finding this out about themselves could be valuable information for the students in seeking future employment however.

Conclusion

The experiences and skills gained by students who participate in a course like this are highly valuable to their development as individuals and potential employees regardless of the student's intended field of work. Most students appreciated and immediately recognize the significance of the opportunity they are being given to participate in a "real life" project. Everyone involved has the opportunity to see a campaign unfold, gain momentum, and reach fruition. It might well be the most effective way to educate students as to the limitations and the powerfulness of advertising.

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