

STUDENTS INTO SPONSORS: CREATING A NETWORK FOR IN-MARKET CAPSTONE COURSES

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ABSTRACT

Among the challenges facing marketing educators today is an increasing need to link the academic and professional worlds. There are many means to accomplish this task: through the use of guest lecturers from industry, affiliation with professional associations, and utilization of capstone courses. However, in many instances, the capstone course consists of a hypothetical project. In order to give students a more realistic capstone experience, an in-market approach is recommended where the faculty and student teams work with a sponsor from the professional community.

To maximize the opportunity for capstone course sponsorship, faculty need to maintain an ongoing relationship with their former students who now can serve as professional links. This paper discusses the advertising in-market capstone course at Northern Arizona University where alumni support, in-market projects, and links to the professional world are integrated into the capstone class. Despite NAU's location in a rural setting, this networking has yielded a series of high profile capstone class sponsorships including: Hunt-Wesson, Dial Corp., Nike, America West Airlines and recently Toyota Motor Company and their advertising agency Saatchi & Saatchi/LA.

Sponsor selection is one of the most critical decisions the instructor will make as it relates to the capstone course. While "cold calling" may ultimately generate a sponsor, results are maximized when another bond already exists between the program and the potential sponsor. This is the key reason that the best source for in-market sponsors are graduates of the program who are employed in the industry.

Many alumni offices maintain lists of graduates and a profile of their current employment status. This is a good place to

begin as the links are often strongest between the faculty member and their former students, rather than with an alumni office. Ideally, graduates of the program who have been out of school 1-3 years should be contacted. These individuals will have likely been promoted out of entry level positions and have both the authority and credibility within their firms to expedite the sponsorship process internally.

Time issues, sensitivity to disseminating internal information, and potential liability resulting from future claim on work are the key reasons some organizations hesitate to commit as a capstone class sponsor. These impediments can generally be overcome easily.

At the beginning of the semester, the sponsor provides some background information in a mock "client meeting" where face-to-face questions can be addressed. Student teams spend the semester in generating: a situation analysis, conducting focus groups and/or taste tests, positioning alternatives, creative strategies, media plans and finally proposed advertising executions. The next time the client will see the student teams is at the final presentation at the end of the semester.

Networking is important for students as they leave the academic world and for marketing educators as they bring this professional world into their classrooms. As a result, graduation should not be thought of as an end to the faculty-student relationship but as a point in which the nature of the relationship changes. An in-market capstone experience can provide a "win-win" scenario for all those involved. Students benefit from the association and rigor imposed on them by a client, faculty stay networked with the professional community and the sponsors are able to provide a meaningful contribution to their alma mater. The process comes full circle.