

## A UNIQUE METHOD OF FORMING STUDENT TEAMS IN MARKETING CLASSES

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### ABSTRACT

The benefits of team projects in marketing classes are well documented in the marketing education literature (Parsons & Lepkowska-White, 2009). In addition, group projects are not without problems. A primary issue with student teams relates to the method of team formation. This paper presents a new, unique method of team formation based on a theory developed by anthropologist Helen Fisher (2009) called *Fisher's Personality Profiles*. Results of an exploratory empirical study using Fisher's model as a method to assign students to teams are very positive. The authors recommend use of this unique method to form student teams for marketing class projects.

### BACKGROUND

Most marketing educators perceive group projects as a valuable learning technique. Use of the team approach is well documented in the marketing literature (Humphreys, 1981; Goretzky, 1984; de los Santos & Jensen, 1985; Dommeyer, 1986; Ramocki, 1987; Henke, Locander, Mentzer, & Nastas, 1988; Gaidis & Andrews, 1990; Haas & Wotruba, 1990; Williams, Beard, & Rymer, 1991; Daly & Worrell, 1993; and Parsons & Lepkowska-White, 2009). Benefits of projects where students work with an actual business are provided not only to the students, but also to instructors, the clients, marketing departments, and the college or university (Haas & Wotruba, 1990).

Group projects provide an opportunity for students to work on comprehensive, realistic marketing issues (Williams, Beard, & Rymer, 1991), stimulate more creative thinking (Haas & Wotruba, 1990), increase student self-confidence (Ramocki, 1987), and sharpen students' communication skills (Haas & Wotruba, 1990). Team projects also tend to motivate students (Williams, Beard, & Rymer, 1991), while at the same time are perceived by students as being effective teaching tools (Karns, 1993).

Marketing educators often prefer group projects for a variety of reasons, too. First, group projects assist faculty in dealing effectively with larger classes (Henke et al., 1988). Instructors may prefer having fewer papers to grade (Dommeyer, 1986). Building

ties with the business community through student group projects is also seen as beneficial from the viewpoint of marketing instructors (Haas & Wotruba, 1990).

Not only are group projects providing immediate benefits to students and educators, but they are helping to provide vital communication skills and competencies in the workforce (Wayne, Mitchell, & Scriven, 1992). Much of the interpersonal communication today in business occurs in small groups. Cooperation and collaboration among people in business is critical today (Byrne, 1993). Group projects are, therefore, providing a training ground that will strengthen graduates' communication and cooperative skills.

Although the benefits are great, group projects are not without problems. Some students find group projects are difficult because they are used to more structure in their assignments. From the instructor's viewpoint, group projects often require more time since greater involvement and guidance is needed (Haas & Wotruba, 1990). The predominant problem of team projects occurs when one or more students do not contribute fully, doing less than their fair share or no work at all, often reaping the benefits of other productive group members (Williams, Beard, & Rymer, 1991). Social psychologists define this problem as "social loafing" (Harkins & Petty, 1982; Harkins & Jackson, 1985; Jackson & Harkins, 1985; Harkins & Szymanski, 1989; Harcum, 1990) or "free-riding" (Sweeney, 1973; Slavin, 1990; Strong & Anderson, 1990). In the management literature "hitchhiking" has been another term used for such behavior (Mesch, 1991). Whatever name is used, these students present serious problems for the group and the instructor.

Many studies have suggested various techniques to deal with problem students in team assignments. Williams, Beard and Rymer (1991) stressed the need for individual accountability by using techniques such as peer evaluation forms, instructor observation of group interaction, documentation of written work provided by each group member, and meeting reports. In discussing techniques to minimize group problems, Mello (1993) and Gaidis and Andrews (1990) suggested the self selection of

groups and documentation of individual performance.

One of the primary issues with student team projects relates to the method of team formation. Numerous methods have been used by marketing educators including student self selection, professor selection, and randomization. Many factors certainly influence team success and performance.

This study offers a preliminary analysis of a new method of team formation for marketing projects. The authors have used Helen Fisher's Personality Profiles (Fisher, 2009) as a means of forming classroom teams. Results based on this new technique are presented in this paper.

Although Fisher's theory has been used to describe couples that are a good match in her currently popular book, *Why Him? Why Her?*, we have proposed and tested use of her personality profile to form student teams which would be a good match. Our hypothesis is that a method for analysis of compatibility for couples may also be used to consider team compatibility.

### **FISHER MODEL**

Helen Fisher is a well-respected research scientist and anthropologist in such areas as attraction and attachment. She has delved into the study of how temperament and chemistry affect mate choice. Her empirical work looks at the effects of biology and personality on attraction. Fisher (2009) has developed an empirical test to measure whether individuals are predominantly one of four personality types. Names of each of the profiles are Explorer, Builder, Director, and Negotiator. Table 1 provides a summary of each of the personality types. Her test includes 56 statements where respondents select one of four alternatives (strongly disagree, disagree, agree, strongly agree). There are 14 statements on this Likert scale used to measure each of the four personality types.

### **METHODOLOGY**

Over the time frame of two semesters, we used two different methods of team selection. During semester one, students had self-selected team members, and the Fisher personality profile was given at the end of the project. We then measured overall team effectiveness and satisfaction with team performance. During semester two, we first measured student personalities according to the Fisher profile, and then each professor put students together into teams based on Fisher's

recommendations. She recommends the following matches:

1. Explorer with Explorer
2. Builder with Builder
3. Negotiator with Director

Our initial thought was that during semester one where students self-selected, there would be a mix of personalities according to Fisher and, therefore, greater discord. We then hypothesized in semester two where we formed teams according to the new theory that greater harmony would be found.

For semester one, a total of 45 student teams were analyzed. Teams consisted of two to six students in a Consumer Behavior, Promotional Strategy, Marketing Research or Advertising Management course. Semester two looked at 30 teams of three to six students in Consumer Behavior, Marketing Research or Retail Marketing. (Note: As of writing this paper the authors have begun analysis for semester three to analyze teams formed again according to the Fisher profile.)

## **RESULTS**

The initial findings strongly support use of the Fisher Personality Profile as a method to assign students to teams for group projects. Interestingly, among Marketing majors there is somewhat of a greater concentration of Explorers. Traits of an Explorer include adventurous, creative, and susceptible to boredom, which may be more fitting of a marketing major than, say, an accounting major. Since the use of Fisher's Personality Profile for team formation in marketing classes is more exploratory for purposes of this paper, most findings are more qualitative than quantitative in nature.

### **SEMESTER ONE: SELF-SELECTED TEAM MEMBERS**

In the two sections of Consumer Behavior, 40% of students were Explorers, while 29% were Builders, 23% Negotiators, and 8% Directors. Once again there is support for a preponderance of Explorers in Marketing classes. Out of the 12 teams in these two sections, half of them (six teams) showed a high level of dissatisfaction with team performance on the final peer evaluation forms. All teams included a mix of personality profiles.

For the Promotional Strategy course where there were only three teams, each developing a promotional campaign for an actual business, the team effort is the predominant focus of the class. The class is set up where one team wins the

**TABLE 1**  
**Helen Fisher's Personality Profiles**

**The Explorer**

- Sensation- and variety-seeking
- Susceptible to boredom
- Have intense and sustained energy
- Impulsive, creative and curious
- Adventurous
- Self-reliant
- Irreverent and autonomous
- Mostly liberal in their political views
- Generous with their time, money and ideas
- Have focused attention
- Goal-oriented
- Procrastinating
- Optimistic, but with a cynical or glib side

**The Director**

- Systemizers—have the propensity to construct and analyze systems
- Superb spatial skills
- Mechanical and mathematical
- Often work as physicians, mechanics or engineers
- Musically inclined
- Excel at sports
- Focused
- Analytical, logical and direct
- Tough-minded, decisive, exacting and skeptical
- Resourceful, self-confident and bold
- Yearn to succeed
- Have fewer friends, but closer friends
- Can be sorrowful

**The Negotiator**

- Imaginative and theoretical; think abstractly
- Unassuming, agreeable and intuitive
- Emotionally expressive
- Have synthesizing minds—collect data, envision relationships between variables, etc.
- Tolerate ambiguity well
- Curious about people
- Think everyone is unique, special and important
- Want to form bonds of intimacy with almost everyone they meet
- Connect on a deeply personal level
- Empathetic; feel others' pain
- Verbally fluent
- Aware of everything around them
- Introspective
- May be unable to focus on important details while they ruminate on the bigger picture

**The Builder**

- Loyal and conscientious
- Dutiful and respectable
- Proper moral conduct is important
- Follow social norms and customs
- Think concretely
- Respect authority
- Detail-oriented
- Cautious, but not fearful
- Social
- Superb at managing people
- Calm and self-confident
- Can be stubborn, closed-minded and dogmatic

competition for their campaign. Interestingly, the team that won consisted mostly of Explorers (by chance since Fisher was not used to form teams). They had the greatest harmony of all teams throughout the semester. In addition, this team did not have students with the highest GPA's or class "stars." They did have the greatest continuity according to Fisher. Another team, the one with the greatest dissatisfaction among team members, would have been the team the professor would have guessed would do well according to past student performance in other Marketing classes. This team that seemed to have the most talented students, yet had the most serious team problems and complaints, was also the one with the greatest diversity according to Fisher (two Builders, one Explorer, one Director, and one Negotiator). Of course, there are many determinants of team success and failure, but in this case the Fisher

personality profile seemed to be one determinant of success.

The Advertising Management class' make up consisted of 41% Explorers, 25% Negotiators, 19% Builders and 6% Directors. Pairs of students comprised the teams. Coincidentally, one-third of the teams were well matched by Fisher's standards: four Explorer teams and one Builder team. The remaining teams were formed of a mix of types that Fisher would deem less compatible. The smoothest functioning teams emerged from the like pairings, with one exception. There was a pair of Explorers who had a rough start, but they eventually ironed out their differences and ended up on a high note with what they described as open and frequent communication. Two of the mixed teams displayed overtly problematic relationships, one especially and persistently so. One of these teams had a Builder-

Negotiator pairing while the other had an Explorer-Negotiator pairing.

The two Marketing Research sections were comprised mostly of duos with a few trios. Their composition was 45% Explorers, 26% Directors, 16% Builders, and 13% Negotiators. Among the 14 teams, only three were matched coincidentally according to Fisher's typology. Two were Explorer teams and one was a Director-Negotiator pairing. Dysfunction was reported in four of the 14 teams; all of those struggles occurred in the mixed typology profile teams that did not fit Fisher's prescription.

Overall, for semester one, where teams self-selected members and Fisher was measured only at the end of the semester, there seemed to be the typical discord. In all seven sections combined, the breakdown of types was 41% Explorers, 25% Builders, 25% Negotiators and 9% Directors.

### **SEMESTER TWO: TEAMS FORMED ACCORDING TO FISHER RECOMMENDED MATCHES**

Once again, Helen Fisher recommends that Explorers go well with other Explorers, Builders with Builders, and Negotiators with Directors. Following measurement of students according to the Fisher personality profile, students were assigned to those recommended matches to the extent possible. Again, there was a preponderance of Explorers (43% Explorers, 17% Builders, 24% Negotiators, and 16% Directors). Out of the 30 team assignments, 89.2% were satisfied with team performance while only 10.8% were dissatisfied with team performance. This 90% satisfaction rating when put in Fisher-recommended groups compares to the approximately 50%-70% satisfaction level in the previous semester where teams self-selected members. Although the number of classes, students and teams is small in this study, the authors believe a significant improvement in team satisfaction

supports the use of team formation using the Fisher personality profile. Further data collection in other Marketing classes may also provide support for this unique approach to team selection.

Comments in Table 2 suggest that teams which were formed according to Fisher's typology were more likely to be effusive about the team experience. Remarks were excerpted from some of the evaluations reflecting more contentious to lukewarm or business-like relationships versus warm and friendly relationships. Students were more likely to express their pleasure with teammates in well-matched teams using all capital letters and exclamation marks as well.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

In conclusion, this study presents a unique method of forming teams of students for marketing class projects based on a theoretical model developed by anthropologist, Helen Fisher (2009). Marketing educators have long debated the most effective methods of putting students together into teams. This study suggests forming teams by first administering the Fisher Personality Profiles test and then assigning students to teams of all Explorers, all Builders, or Directors plus Negotiators. Fisher's research provides support for such matches. The authors of this research also found greater harmony for teams in marketing classes where groups were formed according to Fisher's recommendations. Limitations to this study include the following: (1) a limited number of Marketing classes were used for data collection, (2) findings are more qualitative than quantitative, and (3) personality profiles only represent one determinant of team success and harmony. The authors are continuing to investigate this method of team formation and are expanding the measurement of team performance. For Marketing educators considering use of this new technique, the authors recommend review of Fisher's recent book, *Why Him? Why Her?*

**TABLE 2**  
**STUDENT COMMENTS FROM PEER EVALUATIONS CONDUCTED**  
**IN CLASSES FOR THE TEAM PROJECTS**

<p>Quotes from Mixed Teams:          "Poor; bad communication and poor input of ideas."          "Do whatever to graduate. In other words, not so well."</p>
<p>Quotes from Mostly Matched Teams:          "Efficient, productive, convenient...issue-free"          "Everything was split down the middle."          "Good—both of us put in the same amount of effort."          "No communication error."</p>
<p>Quotes from Well Matched Teams:          "In all honesty, this is the most efficient group I have worked with. Communication and participation were great!! I wish <u>all</u> groups were this effective."          "Our team chemistry is very good."          "Delightful"          "Wonderful! Very similar personalities. Very willing to put in time."          "We've been on the same page since day one."</p>

**References Available on Request**