

THE ETHICAL, SOCIAL AND PEDAGOGICAL BENEFITS OF TEACHING MARKETING WITH NOT-FOR-PROFIT ORGANIZATION PROJECTS

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Abstract

In a context where universities are often criticized of inadequately preparing their students for the real world, especially in applied disciplines like marketing, this paper looks at the on-going collaboration with a non-profit organization, enabling students to apply the marketing theory on real case situations, while collecting feedback from the sponsoring organization and being given the opportunity to implement their recommendations in subsequent semesters.

Introduction

There is an abundance of literature on the benefits of teaching marketing with client-sponsored projects (Elam and Spotts, 2004; Gremler et al., 2000; Kennedy et al., 2001, Lopez and Lee, 2005; Razzouk et al., 2003) however, the unethical dilemma of providing student manpower to work for profit-making companies has not been really addressed. Moreover, although the alternative opportunities offered by working on projects for non-profit organizations has recently raised interest amongst marketing faculty and researchers (Petkus, 2000; Klink and Athaide, 2004; Metcalf, 2010; Cadwallader et al, 2013), most described cases cover ad-hoc punctual collaborations to solve a very well defined issue.

This paper describes the ongoing collaboration of the Geneva Business School (HEG) of the University of Applied Sciences Western Switzerland with a non-profit organization for over two years with three consecutive marketing classes, enabling students to witness the results of implementing their own recommendations in subsequent semesters.

Literature Review

Working on a client-sponsored project is an active learning method that increases the productive potential of students in terms of professional development. It transforms experience into valuable knowledge and skills (Strauss, 2011). This requires more effort from both the teacher and the student (Young and Hawes, 2013). Yet, this additional effort of implementing the taught concepts on a real client-sponsored project makes the course itself more exciting, and therefore more interesting for the students (de los Santos and Jensen, 1985).

Bridging the gap between theory and practice has traditionally been overcome by using case studies in the classroom, yet cases are seen as static and representing an over simplification of real world marketing problems (Burns, 1990). Applied skills are usually better assimilated when working with client-sponsored projects, also known as live-cases (Bove et al., 2009), where they can be developed and tested. Real projects foster strategic thinking, the ability to evaluate and take risks or simply work in teams. Such skills are highly valued when entering the professional world upon graduation (Culkin and Mallick, 2011). They provide involved students with a significant marketable advantage to help them find a first level entry job by becoming more competitive on the labor market (Bove and Davies, 2009).

Yet, providing student manpower to profit-making organizations can lead to unethical situations such as an unfair competition - for consulting companies that could have benefited from potential contracts - or favoritism (de los Santos and Jensen, 1985). Moreover, profit-making

companies are more likely to be in a competitive environment and therefore less willing to share sensitive information, thus needlessly complicating the task for students.

Collaboration with non-profit organizations has shown to be an interesting alternative to teach in a more ethical and transparent manner (Metcalf, 2010). It also provides students with new realities often unexplored in theory or while working with profit-making organizations. Moreover, non-profit organizations being mainly financed through donations, they aim at allocating most of their funds to their cause and invest very little on marketing (Haley, 2004). They therefore value the collaboration and are willing to devote enough time to provide students with the information, cooperation, assistance, support, trust and availability needed to ensure the success of the project (de los Santos and Jensen, 1985). Lastly, students get the opportunity to develop their social responsibility and become, more likely to engage in the community goodwill after their studies (Cadwallader et.al., 2013).

The professional marketing process includes an implementation part, which enables marketers to measure the quality of their work by seeing the reaction of the market to the implemented concept. This is rarely possible for students as they seldom get a chance to implement their work (Emad and Wydler, 2010). Collaborating with a non-profit organization for several semesters in a row, allows students to witness the results of implementing their own recommendations in subsequent semesters.

Program Description

A local non-profit organization working at an international level was approached with the suggestion of running a market research for them as part of the “Consumer Behavior and Market Research” course of two business Bachelor programs at HEG in Geneva. The brief provided by the partner organization was to look for ways to boost participation in their annual “walk of hope” event, organized since almost 30 years and aiming at collecting funds for their cause. The approached organization works “for the defense and promotion of children’s rights” in South and Central America, Africa as well as in India.

One of the programs was taught in English and naturally, students targeted expats and English schools to identify ways of motivating members of this target group to take part in the “walk of hope”.

The second, biggest program, being taught in French, the research targeted the Geneva population and aimed at understanding their perception and awareness of the event, as well as identifying the motivators and inhibitors to participate to the “Walk of Hope”.

There were 3 different classes involved in the French program. Each class was divided in groups of 5 students. The survey targeted 2 populations: the Geneva population, as well as the prescribers (i.e. school teachers).

A survey was conducted on 288 Geneva inhabitants, representative of the town’s population, and on 37 teachers. Results showed that the “Walk of Hope” was very well known and loved, however, although kids were very highly motivated to take part in the event, their interest diminished in their teen and student years before coming back when they had their own children and could participate again to the event as parents.

Results were presented to a team of representatives of the non-profit organization and a follow-up meeting concluded that based on the results, the “client” wanted to launch a new event targeting teens and youngsters. The project was included in the following marketing capstone program that runs over two semesters. In the first semester, students were separated in groups of three that competed against each other to present a concept to the non-profit organization.

One proposal would be selected by the “client” and during the second semester, the whole class would work on the implementation of the chosen concept.

The marketing capstone program was developed around the live project, providing students with the marketing skills needed for their project. Subjects such as “insights research”, “sponsoring”, “marketing for non-profits” and “social media” were included in the curriculum.

Conclusion

This program is still ongoing. The concepts will be presented by students to the client in December of this year and the chosen proposal will be developed in spring 2014.

Feedback from students, still informal at this point, shows a very high level of satisfaction and motivation. They are extremely happy to see that the non-profit organization has taken their recommendations seriously and that they are given the chance to implement it themselves. They are also delighted to be able, for the first time of their life, to see the result of their own work in real life.

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