

## SELLING “THE SOLOIST”: HOW A “ONE UNIVERSITY/ONE BOOK” PROJECT WAS INTEGRATED INTO MARKETING.

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### ABSTRACT

“One Book, One College”, or common reading programs, have sprung up at a number of institutions. The goals include encouraging reading, understanding different perspectives, and developing a sense of community. The results include a sense of community for the students, a clearer understanding of the University’s values, and a common standard of intellectual discourse across the campus. The use of this book in marketing sparked a greater understanding of the role marketing plays in social activities.

### INTRODUCTION

Common reading programs - having an entire campus read the same book, have been adopted by many colleges nationally. A newly released study conducted by the National Association of Scholars (NAS), a consortium of academics upholding academic integrity in the curriculum, indicated that 93% of top four-year universities now have various types of common reading programs (“Common Reading”, 2010). Likewise, Twiton (2007) at Gustavus Adolphus College in Minnesota, posits that common reading programs have gained acceptance on campuses around the country, yet little research has been done concerning the description, objectives and results of the programs.<sup>2</sup>

The predominant use of the program is in an orientation environment for new students. This is understandable because it develops a sense of community through shared experiences, generates the formation of small forums and enhances the freshman experience (Ferguson, 2006; Laufgraben, 2006; Moser, 2010). However, common reading programs have been initiated in campus

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<sup>2</sup> In Twiton’s (2007) research, *Three Cups of Tea* (Mortensen and Oliver, 2006) was the most widely used book, with *The Soloist* second.

environments in addition to freshman orientation, providing benefits such as encouraging students to contemplate citizenship and community involvement, providing additional opportunities for interaction between faculty and students, initiating a new academic tradition and encouraging reading (Anthony, 2008; Barstow, 2003). Additional research about common reading programs would help academicians design and develop exemplary rigorous programs. Although not part of a common reading program, Kimball (2007) used contemporary literature to enhance an understanding of ethical business behavior in his professional selling course. Other than this article, there is little research related to common reading programs and marketing. This paper fills that gap by discussing the common reading program initiated in 2010 at a southwestern university and how the book chosen was applied to marketing theories.

### OVERVIEW OF THE SOLOIST

This private university, with 1,800 traditional undergraduate students, took the lead of the Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences to use *The Soloist* for activities, class discussions, and projects across campus. Steve Lopez, a writer for the Los Angeles Times, wrote *The Soloist* about his experiences with Nathaniel Ayers, a talented violinist he found playing in front of the Beethoven statue in Pershing Square, Los Angeles. Ayers had gone to Julliard in 1975, but the pressure and other underlying problems combined to force him into the life of a homeless and mentally disturbed person who had been living on the streets of Los Angeles for 30 years. Lopez took it upon himself to help Ayers by getting a violin and a bass donated. Lopez introduced Ayers to the Los Angeles Men’s Project (LAMP) and told him that he had to play the violin there for safety. Ayers refused and took the violin to his normal sleeping place under a bridge. Then Lopez arranged for an apartment for Ayers, where Ayers refused to sleep. Finally, Lopez arranged for music lessons by

a member of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, which could only happen in the apartment. The book concludes with many steps forward (getting Ayers to sleep in the apartment) and many steps backward, but the reader is left with awe and sadness. The Soloist is a story that lends itself to discussions in several areas, including:

- How do you help someone who does not think he needs help?
- How do you sell the concept of helping people who do not want help?
- How do you get the resources to even try to help?
- How do you sustain a continuum of resources?

### THE COMMON READING PROJECT

The College of Arts and Sciences at this University developed several university-wide objectives associated with the program:

1. Promote reading and the discussion of diverse perspectives as a common intellectual experience among students.
2. Promote writing as a way of learning: students reflect upon or research questions inspired by reading and discussion. Students learn to write for academic and civic communication - a way to actively engage with the world.
3. Integrate the university's core values into student learning, namely encouraging students to reflect upon personal, professional and societal values; a respect for diverse communities and the biodiversity of the planet; lifelong learning; and community service.

Our choice in the College of Business was to get the Principles of Marketing class involved by putting the book on the syllabus and initiating conversations about possible links to marketing theory. See Appendix B for class schedule.

### POTENTIAL MARKETING TOPICS

The authors discovered in preparing for class discussion about the book that there were several issues emerging from the interaction between Lopez and Ayers that were applicable to marketing:

#### **Networking**

In our marketing classes, we teach the all important fact that networking is the key to, not only business and career success, but community leadership and behavior change of all types. Steve Lopez, the Los Angeles Times reporter who wrote the book, was connected in many ways that enabled him to get resources for Nathaniel Ayers, including access to the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

### Bottom of the Pyramid (BOP) Markets and the Value Chain

Most marketers are familiar with the Bottom of the Pyramid (BOP) concept of creating markets in areas where the population is too rural and/or too poor for traditional products (Prahalad, 2002). There are four billion people worldwide in the emerging consumer base at the bottom of the pyramid that could swell to six billion over the next forty years. Prahalad's research pointed to an opportunity when multi-nationals change their business model and their price structure, such as producing small sachets of product instead of larger packages that cost more. An aspect of the BOP, urban slums, is the dimension inhabited by Nathaniel Ayers. There are complex operating environments and challenges in these markets, and reaching them requires the right business model (Anderson, Markides, & Kupp, M., 2010). Quite simply, the value chain and the inhabitants are different. The value chain (Porter, 1985) contains these elements:  
Inbound Logistics>Operations>Outbound Logistics>Marketing and Sales>Service  
In terms of inbound logistics, getting the "product" prepared and packaged (for example, moving off the streets, finding jobs), there are social workers, psychologists, state hospitals, city shelters, etc. Most of these are staffed by educated people. The outbound logistics, however, where the customer is the end point, change dramatically because the recipient of the message/product has a number of issues blocking acceptance of the message (education, mental illness, fear of attack or robbery, etc.). So the well-meaning people "selling" the ideas of changing behavior, moving inside, or even getting work, have a natural barrier to getting their message across, which leads to a discussion about traditional sales process models.

#### **Sales Process**

The traditional sales process/communication model has these elements (Futrell, 2008, p.149):  
Salesperson>Message development> Sales presentation>(noise) Buyer interprets>Buyer receives message  
In this case, the "salesperson" has two roles, getting financing and attempting to motivate a behavioral response that serves the customer best (meeting the customer's needs). In both roles, the correct type of communication is important. In dealing with BOP markets, community involvement has proven critically important. Community trust and buy-in are both part of in-bound logistics and the development of the presentation message (Futrell, 2008). Even with community and government involvement for good causes, "the problem with (many) not-for-profit

businesses is that they still do not cover the cost of capital” (Garrette & Karnani, 2010, p.33).

### **Marketing Exchange**

The concept of marketing exchange is another point for discussion in the BOP market. A prevalent definition of exchange is: “the act of obtaining a desired object from someone by offering something in return” (Kotler & Armstrong, 2010, p. 7). Bagozzi (1975) discussed the aspect of rational thinking in the exchange process because people will evaluate and choose a path providing them with the most favorable outcomes. In *The Soloist*, an unequal exchange was evidently perceived by Ayers in the potential consequences of “buying” the propositions being “sold” by Lopez.

Arguably, there could be other marketing viewpoints involved, such as the marketing concept and motivational theories, and we encouraged students to investigate many paths. We wanted students to think about the following questions:

- Marketing finds out what the customer needs and gives it to them (at a profit). How does this relate to Nathaniel Ayers? How are Steve Lopez’s needs met here?
- People “buy” things because there is something in the process of benefit to them. Why won’t Nathaniel “buy” Lopez’ ideas? Is there a disconnect between Lopez’ idea of the benefits that will accrue to Ayers and Ayers’ ideas?
- Even when we know our ideas are right, we must wait for “the customer” to come to the same conclusion. Why is that?
- What is society’s responsibility to this dilemma? If marketing produces the profits that drive our economy, is it a moral obligation to use some of those profits for social purposes?
- Are people truly motivated only by internal forces?
- How much does “fear of failure” or “fear of success” play in any of this?

### **Additional Societal Factors**

In addition to marketing concepts, as discussed, critical thinking about societal issues presented in the book was also encouraged. The incremental rise of homelessness in the U.S. rivals the incremental creation and implementation of housing policy concerning the homeless. Policy issues in both previous and current Federal administrations play a role in resources available and in what proportions to the homeless and mentally ill (See Appendix C for further discussion). Marketers should be cognizant of the legal and legislative issues they may encounter when operating in the exchange environment.

### **Addressing the Needs of the Street Homeless**

Even given Ayers’ obvious talent, his mental illness has forced him into a trap that some 254,000 people in Los Angeles share - that of homelessness (“Homelessness”, 2010). “Homelessness among persons with severe and persistent mental illness is the most pervasive manifestation of the failure of public policy” (Newman & Goldman, 2009, p.299). Since the 1960’s, housing policy has shifted from hospitals to the community, which could be a benefit to Ayers because institutionalizing him would probably not help him. Such shifts are evident when poor markets are not addressed adequately and underserved people must be supported by other available options.

However, because of Lopez’ reporting, the Mayor of Los Angeles became involved and better services were provided. This story provides researchers and marketers the opportunity to observe how collaborative efforts across public and private sectors can be implemented.

### **The Unmet Needs Trap**

The unmet needs of the poor (clean water, eyeglasses, etc.) are often seen as offering a huge untapped business opportunity. But, as is seen above, just because there is a need does not mean there is a market. As our students learn, markets require buyers willing to buy the product. Colgate thought that over one billion people in India would represent a “good market” for toothpaste. However, they encountered barriers such as illiteracy and lack of education in the use of toothpaste (Perreault, Cannon, & McCarthy, 2009). Also, just because the poor are a huge market in the aggregate does not mean that individuals can afford the products (Garrette & Karnani, 2010).

## **RESULTS SEPTEMBER 1-30**

The book was added to the syllabus and the book was offered free of charge. Of the three undergraduate classes, only the marketing students (N= 46) were interested, so the management class was not used for this program. In week four, the movie, *The Soloist*, was shown in two parts (covering two classes) and a survey was taken:

	Yes	No	Don't Care
1) From what you know right now, do you agree with the objectives, which include: *Encouraging reading *Understanding difference perspectives *Developing a sense of community.	90%	10%	0
2) It is this book worthwhile in a business course?	65%	35%	0
	Yes	No	A little
3) Can you see how this relates to marketing?	65%	4%	31%

The result of this first step told us that we were on the right track. But the 35% who did not yet see how the story relates to marketing indicated that we needed to reinforce the customer need satisfaction element. We revisited the communication model and the value chain in week five.

### RESULTS OCTOBER 1-30

On October 7<sup>th</sup> Steve Lopez visited the campus for several student events. During one of his lectures, he mentioned that Nathaniel Ayers' passion for music had awakened in him a passion for journalism that he did not know he possessed. This left the marketing students to realize that Lopez benefited from what Ayers' had to "sell" him - that of a new realization of his own passion. It was a demonstration of the theory of exchange.

A second survey was given in week 8, (10/19):

	Yes	No	Don't care/a little
1)At this point, do you agree with the objectives?:	89%	4.5%	4.5%
2)Is this book worthwhile for use in a business course?	75%	20%	2%
3) Can you see how this relates to marketing?	77%	2%	18%

In comparison with the first survey, about the same number agreed with the objectives stated in question one. For question two, the percentage who thought it was worthwhile in a business course increased from 65% to 75%, with a drop by 15% in those who initially said it was not. For question three, agreement that this subject relates to marketing increased from 65% to 77%, so we accomplished our objective of reducing (from 33% to 18%) those who did not see it as related to marketing. Even though we were only dealing with 46 students, the data showed us that integrating marketing into a social topic designed for another college holds value for university-wide engagement.

Comments from students included:

"Initially, he [Lopez] was not looking for any sort of friendship, just strictly a column....Little did he know he met somebody who has completely changed his life."

In discussion after the second survey, the students agreed that these issues will be part of their lives and that understanding the needs of the "customers" in these situations are important.

### CONCLUSION

The Soloist brings to real life the subject of the needs of the poor and mentally ill worldwide, the projected dramatic increase in needs of this population versus richer populations, the motivations of well-meaning businesses and social organizations and the dilemma of the "customer", the recipient of the efforts by those who want their lives to improve, sometimes whether they want that outcome or not. The reverse perspective is worth noting as well. Steve Lopez felt that, in an altruistic way, he was the "customer" receiving benefits from his exchange with Nathaniel Ayers. Marketing students must address the problems of these and other populations that are sure to accompany them no matter what careers they choose. If they are lucky, they will work for companies that make community service part of their mission.

**References (Appendix A) and Appendices B (Course Schedule) and C (Public administration implications) are available from [jdietz@laverne.edu](mailto:jdietz@laverne.edu)**