

BEST-PRACTICE MARKETING SIMULATION TEACHING FOR NEW USERS

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ABSTRACT

This article summarizes key best-practice design and execution principles and practices for maximizing the teaching and learning experience with marketing simulations for new users.

INTRODUCTION

Best-practice teaching principles and practices are organized around a “Why?”, “Which?”, and “How?” framework. Given space limitations, this article discusses only key best-practices. An interested reader is invited to access the LINKS website (<http://www.LINKS-simulations.com>) for more details, discussion, and teaching resources.

WHY USE A MARKETING SIMULATION?

A marketing simulation is a series of dynamically-interrelated “cases.” “Dynamic” describes the interrelationships among the competing simulation teams. “Cases” reflects the outside-of-class case-like activity that students go through in each simulation round: private preparation followed by one or more team meetings.

Beyond the consideration of content variety in course design, the classic reasons for teaching with a marketing simulation include interactivity with an engaging team-based exercise and the competitive and attention-getting nature of marketing simulations. These quotations from past students provide the rationale for using marketing simulations:

- *“Far and away the most useful, effective, grueling, and fun educational experience I’ve encountered.”*
- *“This is the real world ... with real world workloads, satisfactions, and frustrations.”*

Simulations are especially useful in the standard marketing curriculum sequence marketing principles, marketing management, and marketing strategy.

Specialized simulations also exist for marketing electives such as channels management (e.g., the LINKS Multi-Channel Management Simulation) and new products management (e.g., the LINKS Positioning Strategy Simulation). And, for an

introductory marketing course, smaller marketing simulations (e.g., the 4-round LINKS Marketing Tactics Simulation) exist that don’t overwhelm the rest of the course content.

WHICH MARKETING SIMULATION?

Plentiful marketing simulations exist. Do a Google search on “marketing simulation” for links to web-based marketing simulations. But, also ask colleagues for recommendations. Ask colleagues about simulations they use and and/or know about.

Most web-based marketing simulations offer a demo to permit perspective adopters to explore and “road test” a simulation. Review web-based resources (e.g., FAQs and tutorials) available to support instructors and students. Test the support offered by a simulation vendor, by asking “customer support” to respond to a question or two.

HOW TO USE A MARKETING SIMULATION?

General “How To Use” advice includes:

- The instructor has to be committed to the simulation. Instructors can’t outsource simulation instruction to the simulation vendor.
- Plan for an in-class introduction and a post-event in-class debriefing in your course syllabus.
- Most of the student activity and work occurs outside of class, as with traditional cases.
- Bring the marketing simulation into classes as appropriate to class topics. For example, use 10-15 minute class-time “tutorials” to explore and spot-light simulation elements. Examples of such spot-lighting include a key table or exhibit from the simulation manual, a simulation financial report, or a simulation research study.

Organizing Your Marketing Simulation Event

Team sizes of about four students per team and five-six teams per simulation industry serve most instructors well. As team size increases, team management issues assume greater importance. And, larger-sized teams create additional logistical problems involving conflict-free meeting times in academic degree-granting programs. Larger-sized teams do, of course, simulate project teams encountered in everyday business life.

While many instructors require/permit students to form their own simulation teams, best-practice teaching has the instructor forming teams based on background information provided by the students (including confidential-to-instructor “vetos” of up to two class members with whom a student doesn’t wish to be teamed).

Instructor-formed teams offer plentiful benefits:

- It’s realistic (there’s usually no choice in team assignments in working-world teams).
- It’s equitable (everyone has the same chance of being teamed with “friends” and “strangers”).
- It’s efficient (equal-sized teams are conveniently created by the instructor).
- It’s diverse (diverse teams can be created across student backgrounds, majors, native English-speaking status, employer, and gender).

Performance Assessment

Course design includes student assessment. Best practices with marketing simulations include:

- Allocating some of the course grade to within-simulation performance, but this should be a minority of a course’s simulation-based grade.
- The majority of a course’s simulation-based grade should be allocated to traditional team-based written reports and presentations at the mid-point and the end of the simulation event.

Best-practice marketing simulation teaching includes individual evaluation elements such as an in-class pre-event quiz, written assignments and memos (“Write In Detail About Something Really Useful That’s Not in the Simulation Manual” or a post-simulation “Advice To My Successor” memo), and simulation-specific examination questions.

Final Team Presentations

If a marketing simulation event concludes with team-based in-class presentations (a common course design element), adequate within-class time must be budgeted in the course syllabus. Depending on course format, it may be necessary to make additional class time available prior to the final in-class presentations for teams to meet to prepare their presentations. Final in-class presentation scheduling also influences simulation scheduling timing (when the simulation begins and the pacing of simulation rounds throughout the course).

Presidential Review Meetings

The most important within-event best-practice in teaching successfully with marketing simulations is scheduling private presidential review meetings with

teams. These private, pre-scheduled, 30-minute meetings with each team permit the instructor to review each team’s performance/progress and to answer team members’ questions. This is “one-with-a-few” teaching/coaching rather than “one-to-the-masses” lecture-hall instruction. Presidential review meetings are private meetings (i.e., instructor and one team only present) due to the marketing simulation’s competitive nature.

Presidential review meetings provide a powerful teaching/learning opportunity (instructor as coach) at key points during the simulation event. They simulate business review meetings with a “boss” or senior management official. Re-assigned class time is recommended for presidential review meeting scheduling, with teams not meeting with the instructor using that time for their own private firm deliberations. Meeting schedules may have to extend beyond class time, due to the number of simulation firms. In shorter events, a single round of review meetings might be scheduled, perhaps just after the second simulation round. In longer events, several waves of presidential review meetings might be scheduled with a second round of review meetings occurring at about the event’s mid-point.

Formats for presidential review meeting include requiring teams to submit questions/issues to be discussed before the scheduled presidential review meeting or perhaps requiring the preparation of a SWOT analysis to be discussed during the meeting. Potential instructor questions to pose during presidential review meetings include:

- What are the largest problems facing your firm?
- To your customers, what differential advantage does your firm offer compared to competitors?
- What are your most/least important markets?
- Is your team organization arrangement “best” for the problems/challenges now facing your firm?

NEXT STEPS

A new/perspective marketing simulation user might follow-up this brief article by conversing with colleagues about their marketing simulation usage and reviewing web-based marketing simulations (and their associated instructional resources). New users are encouraged not to be intimidated by the learning curve associated with adding marketing simulations to courses. Such an up-front learning curve investment will be amortized over career-long opportunities to exploit marketing simulations for effective teaching and learning in a wide-range of marketing courses.