

THE CHALLENGE OF CREATING INTEREST IN MARKETING AMONG GRADUATE ACCOUNTING STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

A major challenge of teaching marketing to Master of Accountancy students is to create interest in a topic not generally recognized as an important part of the accounting profession. Recent reports suggest that major changes in accounting education are needed and students need more breadth outside of specialized accounting topics. This paper discusses the use of student "current events presentations" in creating interest in marketing and providing opportunities of utilizing creative skills in a non-structured team project.

INTRODUCTION

A recently published report by the American Accounting Association (Albrecht and Sack 2000) suggests that accounting education must change if it is to remain relevant and add value to accounting students' curriculum. The major conclusions are as follows:

- We are not using the right methods to expose students to highly relevant concepts such as globalization, technology, and ethics.
- Our pedagogy often lacks creativity and does not develop the students' "ability to learn" skills.
- Our rule-based memorization, test-for-content, and prepare-for-certifying-exam model is inefficient, but more importantly it does not prepare students for the ambiguous business world they will encounter upon graduation.
- There is too much lecture and reliance on textbooks as course drivers.
- We are reluctant to develop creative types of learning, such as team work, assignments with real companies, case analysis, oral presentations, role playing, team teaching, technology assignments, videos, writing assignments, the involvement of business professionals in the classroom, and studying current events.

Within the past decade, over 35 states have changed CPA requirements to include graduate-level courses beyond the baccalaureate degree. While most programs require increased

specialization in accounting topics, few schools have changed curriculum to include broader management education to prepare students for future careers. The American Accounting Association report cited above will likely encourage additional schools to make significant curriculum changes in the near future.

The major challenge to those providing the broader management exposure while using less structured pedagogies is to develop a high level of interest and excitement about broader management topics to students who traditionally are focused on becoming excellent accountants. This paper should be of special interest to those teaching marketing to accounting students and to other non-marketing majors.

On the first day of the marketing class, composed of accounting students only, (August 1999) students were asked to submit written comments regarding their opinions about their enrollment in a marketing class. The following questions are representative of the responses given:

- Why do we have to take a marketing class?
- Why do auditors need to know about marketing?
- What does marketing have to do with being a tax accountant?
- Why don't marketing cases have specific answers and only one correct course of action?
- Why can't we focus more on accounting topics in the marketing class?

THE MASTERS OF ACCOUNTANCY PROGRAM AT BYU

An integrated accounting program was introduced at Brigham Young University in 1991. The program consists of a five-year educational experience that leads to both a Baccalaureate and Master of Accountancy (MAcc) degree. This program exceeds the educational CPA requirements of all states. The competition for admission to the program is intense; the average GPA for the entering students over the past five years is 3.7. All of the "Big Five" firms recruit graduates of the program for national placement. Over the past decade graduates have had virtually 100 percent placement. The Public

Accounting Report (July 31, 1999) ranked the program number 3 in the U.S. at both the graduate and undergraduate levels.

After completing basic business courses and general education courses at the end of the sophomore year, students enter into the "junior core," consisting of integrated and fairly rigorous accounting courses. During these classes, students are exposed to a wide range of accounting topics. During the "junior core" they are especially encouraged to "think like accountants."

THE MANAGEMENT CORE

Following the two-semester "junior core" experience, students are enrolled the following fall semester into 12 credit hours of MBA courses consisting of finance, operations, organizational behavior, and marketing. These courses are similar to the introductory courses in the full-time MBA program. At the completion of the one-semester broadening experience, students finish the next three semesters focusing on specialized accounting courses.

In the fall semester, 2000, one hundred sixty-three MAcc students were assigned to one of three sections for the management core (54 students per class). Students were with the same classmates for all classes. Students were randomly assigned to one of eleven groups in each section by the accounting office staff. Students were therefore members of the same study group for each of the four classes. Group assignments were made in each of the four classes, including written cases and homework assignments. In two courses the final examination was a group project.

As suggested above, in past years the accounting students often questioned the need for the non-accounting experience. The intensive use of the case method, with the resulting "there may not be a right answer" to the case analysis, is particularly frustrating to accounting students. They spend a whole year searching for and finding only one right answer to various accounting problems. The pedagogy employed in the management core courses was very different that that employed in the accounting classes.

THE CHALLENGE OF THE MARKETING CLASS

There are numerous studies that explore marketing education for accountants (Blanchette 1996). Other studies examine the role of marketing educators in designing appropriate courses. The content of the MAcc marketing course is similar to that offered in

the MBA program, and the major challenge was to create and maintain interest in the marketing topics when students are so focused on accounting.

The following objectives of the MAcc marketing course were developed and then shared with the accounting students the first day of class:

1. To learn the vocabulary of marketing and business
2. To learn marketing principles, models, and analysis
3. To provide opportunities of applying marketing principles, analysis, and models so that they become second nature throughout a professional career
4. To learn the essential elements of excellent marketing management, including the fit between marketing and gospel principles
5. To build confidence in the skills of problem identification, analysis, and decision making
6. To be aware of the changes in the environment and the impact on marketing practices
7. To appreciate the insight, experiences, and abilities of other classmates
8. To learn how marketing can be helpful throughout a professional career

The overall challenge is to change the thinking orientation of the accounting students. Mr. Jack Welch, CEO of General Electric, states "The secret of success is changing the way you think." The students spend years learning to think like accountants. The objective of the marketing class is to show them how to think like marketers.

To illustrate the change in thinking, a question is asked the first day of class: "When is a product sold?" Answers include the standard accounting responses such as; (1) when the title to the product is exchanged; (2) when money is transferred; (3) when it is recorded on the books as a sale, etc. After some probing questions students begin to look at other alternative answers to the question. Students begin to understand that a marketing response could include the response, "when the customer is satisfied." Students are told that even the marketing response to that question has evolved over time and will likely evolve in future years. Ten years ago the emphasis was on meeting the needs of customers, which then evolved into exceeding customer satisfaction, which further evolved into the notion of first anticipating customer needs and then exceeding their satisfaction.

METHODOLOGY

A questionnaire was administered the first day in the marketing course in August 2000.

The questionnaire was designed to provide a more quantitative data than had been gathered the previous year. One hundred sixty-three students responded to ten statements, with (1) representing "strongly agree" and (7) representing "strongly disagree." The results are as follows:

- Marketing activities are less ethical than accounting activities 4.01
- I believe that a marketing class should be required of all accounting students 2.39
- Marketing topics are probably more interesting than accounting topics 3.01
- I expect to receive an "A" grade in this class 1.54
- I believe the marketing class should be an elective offering for accounting students 4.53
- If the marketing class were an elective course I would probably not be enrolled 4.64
- I look forward to learning new marketing principles, models, and ideas 1.91
- I have heard positive things about the marketing class from students enrolled last year 3.83
- I am excited to be enrolled in the marketing class 2.33
- I believe a marketing class will benefit me throughout my professional career 1.86

There were no statistically significant differences between the response rates of accounting students enrolled in the three emphases (tax, professional, and information technology).

A PREFERENCE FOR STRUCTURE

Student feedback from the previous year suggested that the MAcc students preferred to be told what to do and how to do assignments. For over one year they were exposed to daily accounting homework where they were taught that all accounting problems have a "right answer." Because there is not always a "right answer" to marketing cases, most MAcc students were uncomfortable with the case method. To help alleviate some discomfort, reading material and several approaches to case preparation were provided. The instructor provided as little guidance

as possible so those students would struggle with the case method. The "right answer" was not the objective of the course. Rather, the emphasis was placed on problem identification and analysis. Course evaluation (discussed later in the paper) suggests that students became more accustomed to the unstructured approaches as the semester progressed.

The grading system for the course was intentionally flexible and somewhat ambiguous. In many of the accounting courses a point system is used, with daily or weekly feedback. Students liked knowing their standing in the class from the beginning to the end of the semester. Feedback was provided in the marketing class, but only in relation to positive comments on performance and suggestions for improvement; feedback did not relate to expected course grades. Again, this supported the objective of helping students understand that professional success does not rest on a point system.

The following statement was included in the course outline:

How many points do you need to be successful in your employment? How many points are needed to be successful in your marriage or family? Will you receive daily or weekly feedback throughout life to measure your performance? Many students prefer a specific point system, but it just doesn't work that way, even in accounting firms. Now that you are moving from an undergraduate experience to entering into the MBA Core classes, it provides an opportunity to move from a point system to a less structured grading system. I am happy to provide feedback along the way, but not related to grades. You are encouraged to come to my office and visit as often as you care to.

THE CURRENT EVENTS PROJECT

During the past decade there have been numerous articles that outline the advantages of team projects in marketing classes (Williams, Beard, and Rymer 1991; Deeter-Schmetz and Ramsey 1996; Haws and Wotruba 1990; Gaidis and Andrews 1990; Bacon, Stewart, and Stewart-Belle 1998). Such articles, along with the teaching experience of the instructor, suggest that a team approach should form the structure to increase interest in marketing topics among graduate accounting students.

In addition to the team approach, the instructor was interested in creating a high level of creativity among

the MAcc Students. The Albrecht-Sack report strongly suggested the need to develop opportunities for accounting students to develop creative skills (Albrecht and Sack 2000). Students were given much flexibility and very little guidance with only the following information provided about the current events presentations.

The current event presentations will be evaluated by the following.

1. The topics should be current and of great interest to the class members
2. Creativity will play a major role in determining the product grade
3. The presentations should show extensive use of primary and secondary research
4. Electronic presentation aids (power point, videos, the network, etc.) should be used
5. The topic should relate to marketing in some way
6. All members of the group should participate in the oral presentation
7. Presentations are limited to 20 minutes

A few examples of the current events projects in 2000 include:

- Marketing planning for the 2002 Winter games
- Marketing techniques used to promote professional wrestling
- Monitoring the opposition to the opening of a new Super Wal-Mart in a rural community
- Marketing new colors for the athletic teams at BYU
- Examining the marketing implications of the retirement of LaVell Edward, BYU football coach for the past 29 years
- Marketing of various e-businesses
- Marketing of a new SUV by Saturn
- Examining the effect of a new regional shopping mall in the area
- Advertising at the 1999 Superbowl
- The current marketing programs of CPA firms
- Advertising plans for the 2002 Olympic games
- Marketing the XFL

Every project utilized power-point presentations (or similar software) and most were accompanied by video, internet connections, and various displays. Class members received numerous gifts and tokens related to the presentation topic.

THE SUCCESS OF THE CURRENT EVENTS PROJECT

Qualitative feedback has been gathered since the introduction of the current events assignment two years ago. An evaluation of the course evaluations

reveals that although the majority of students did not mention the current events project specifically, all comments formally made by students about the project were positive. No negative comments were received on the forms. The 35 comments (143 student evaluation forms were submitted) regarding the current events project are represented by the following:

The current events presentations were very interesting. (8)

I enjoyed working on the group projects, especially the current events project. (13)

The current events projects were really fun. (8)

It was fun to use our creativity when developing the projects (6).

On numerous occasions students mentioned the current events project raised their interest in marketing. The informal office discussions were always positive and no negative comments were made during the past two years of using this approach.

In order to gather more quantitative data, a questionnaire was administered at the mid-point of Fall Semester 2000, with the following results (1="Strongly Disagree", 5="Strongly Agree"):

- The current events projects are interesting and informative. 4.07
- Working in teams is a major benefit of the current events project. 4.42
- Creativity is an essential part of the current events project. 4.35
- I wish we were provided with more direction for the project. 2.35
- The project has caused me to become more interested in marketing 3.67
- Class members look forward to the current events presentations 3.89

It appears that the accounting students value creativity and teamwork. A similar questionnaire will be distributed after the completion of the semester and responses will be compared to those provided by this survey.

IMPLICATIONS

Using team projects in marketing classes is not a new idea. However, when teaching accounting students it appears that current events projects are a useful way to provide for (1) team work (2) creativity, and (3) increased interest in marketing topics. Some

students were able to gain new insights on how marketing can assist in an accounting career. It also appears to be a good way to provide opportunities for developing creative skills and escaping the "rules" of how to do a project. A side benefit of the current events project was that the instructor learned a lot about the current changes in business, especially in the technical environment and in new e-businesses.

Several of the concerns raised in the Albrecht-Sack report are addressed by the current events presentations.

- Students are given an ambiguous assignment to which they must provide their own structure
- Creativity is encouraged in both the topic and the manner in which it is presented to the class
- Work is performed in teams, and all members of the team are encouraged to participate in the oral presentation
- Teams effectively use technology (power point, the inter-net, video, etc.)
- The topics are very current, dealing with events happening within the past few months

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