

LEARNING BY DOING: THE USE OF REAL-LIFE PROJECTS IN THE UNDERGRADUATE MARKETING STRATEGY COURSE

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the value of real-life, client sponsored group projects, and presents a blueprint for their successful implementation into the capstone Marketing Planning and Strategy course

INTRODUCTION

Marketing educators who seek applied pedagogical perspectives for their classroom have found what they are looking for in the form of group term projects. Overall, the literature is supportive of group projects as learning enhancement tools (Shanka and Napoli, 2001; Stanier, 1997). Heally et al, (1996) hail the benefits students gain when working cooperatively, in terms of the learning experience and also the acquisition of team work skills. Working in groups is also believed to offer the students an opportunity to validate their views as they compare them with those expressed by other members of the group (Kilb, 1998).

Ivins (1997) highlights the "real-world" nature of projects and believes that they tend to place a higher level of psychological taxation on students and cause them to deliver a higher quality product. Others cite the value of group projects as amplifiers of students' awareness of characteristics and skills they need to succeed in the real world. Whether it is the first meeting with the prospective client, preparing a proposal, conducting the research, analyzing the data, writing the report, or making the presentation, these various activities help students realize the importance of organizational, analytical, and communication skills necessary for completing successfully a group term project. Gordon (1998) argues that possessing technical and quantitative skills is necessary but not sufficient for succeeding in today's business environment, and that students should learn to be effective problem solvers, critical thinkers, team players, and master communicators. Similar views are expressed by Gremler et al. (2000).

Gremler et al. (2000) believes that students realize the value of taking more responsibility for their learning from

real-life group projects, and the opportunity to get to know other students and form enduring relationships (Radloff and Murphy, 1993). However, some students, especially the more traditional ones, favor working on a number of smaller projects individually (Razzouk and Seitz, 2001). Others have suggested that when students have a say on whether to work on a project by themselves or in a group, and when they have a say on the composition of their group, they are more likely to internalize the group responsibilities and function more effectively (McLean, Redi, and Scharf, 1998/1999).

From a teacher's perspective, group projects present a number of challenges. First of all is the issue of finding meaningful projects for student groups. Another issue pertains to the perceived difficulties in grading and assigning value to individual members of a project team (Schibrowsky and Peltier 1995). Related to this issue are the potential problems of responding to students' complaints about their grades on a group project. Because of the level of subjectivity often involved in assigning values to individual student contributions, professors often resort to assigning the same grade to all members of the team irrespective of their individual contribution (Conway et al, 1993)

Another area of concern for professors in the context of today's global classroom is the tendency for some students to select their buddies to work with on the same team. This process often results in talent and background imbalance — some very strong teams and some very poor teams. Such imbalance often leads to problems at the end of the course in terms of the level of student performance and potential embarrassment before clients and peers (McCorkle et al., 1999).

Shanka and Napoli (2001) studied the attitudes of marketing students towards group projects. The authors identified four clusters: 1. "conformists" who are undecided about the value of group projects and participate to a minimum; 2. "idealists" who have the most positive attitudes towards group projects and invest the energy and time necessary for their successful completion; 3. "pragmatists" who have had some

experience with group projects yet are convinced that some of the problems outweigh any potential benefits; and, 4. "Cynics" who hold the most negative views of group projects and believe that not all students contribute equally and that students who do most of the work are not rewarded appropriately. The authors conclude that while many students view group projects as contributing to their overall communication and interpersonal skills, they do not all participate in group projects with the same level of enthusiasm.

PREMISES FOR A PRACTICAL PERSPECTIVE

This paper presents a practical perspective to incorporating meaningful real-world group learning experiences that can be implemented effectively in upper-division marketing course and is built on the following premises:

1. Group projects are not for everyone. In any particular class, students are offered to work on the assigned activity (i.e. marketing plan, marketing audit, advertising campaign, case analysis, or marketing research project) in a group or individually; however, the quality of work demanded from each unit will be the same.

2. Group projects are presented as only one alternative for meeting the course requirements. In the case of the Marketing Strategy course, student who do not work on the Strategic Marketing Plan or Marketing Audit, are allow to write a comprehensive case on an organization they are familiar with, or perform a case analysis using a strategic market management perspective.

3. Before student commit to working on a group project, they are given time to meet and interact with other classmates and decide who they want to work with. Hence the choice of group or individual project is made by the students.

4. Students are more likely to participate in projects that they value as being relevant to their perspective careers. Accordingly, prior to each term, the professor contacts (or responds to contacts from local organizations that are willing to have students complete a project for them. During the first class, students are told about the specifics of each project, what is sought by management, who is the contact person, and what is needed to complete that project.

5. Students resent having to invest much time and even money to complete free consulting reports for community organizations. Hence, arrangements are made with the sponsoring organizations to pay all out of pocket expenses, and make an additional contribution to

the Department.

6. Students resist the idea of having to do all the work and having free loaders get a higher grade of mere association. Therefore, students are told that any group using due process, may terminate the membership of any team member, but only after three written memos have been served the student and copied to the professor, and only after the professor has had a chance to meet with the student. Once the student is voted out of the team, he is given a chance to select an individual project under the same criteria that other students are held to.

7. Students are more likely to make an effort toward completing a group project if they have committed themselves to do so. Accordingly, students who decide to work on a group project for a client commit to doing so in a form of a signed group consulting proposal that they have prepared for the client.

8. Students learn more from a group project when they participate in the various phases and activities of the project. Hence, student are asked to involve themselves in as many of the project's activities as possible. A project leader is selected on the second day of class to organize and coordinate the effort of team members.

HOW TO OBTAIN RELEVANT REAL-LIFE PROJECTS

Probably the most discouraging force against real -life projects is finding enough of them that actually fit the criteria of providing hands-on experience, pay all the out-of pocket expenses, have management treat the students with respect and be willing to comply with request for information in a timely manner, be willing to attend the group presentations, and write a thank you letter to participating students.

Most educators would agree that there is always a number of organizations in their communities who want "free" giveaways. However, preference is given to projects that cover the out-of-pocket expenses, and make a contribution to the department funds. Furthermore, preference is given to organizations that understand the value of the project contribution and are willing to consider the information provided by the students.

In search of valuable projects, visiting the local Chambers of Commerce, conducting free seminars and workshops on marketing, visiting area government agencies and volunteering to assist not-for-profit organizations is a good start. As is often the case, many organizations become repeat customers and tell their

friends resulting in four or five paying projects that may be taken on by a Marketing Strategy and Planning course in a given term. Based on experience it necessary that the Marketing Department or the School, with a purpose to develop "Business Partners" systematize the search for projects, formalize relationships and procedures and establish realistic expectations. Recent clients for such group projects have included a local bank, two local hospitals, the county Parks and Recreation department, a CPA firm and a regional department store.

Most of the group projects cost on average \$800 - \$1,500 in out-of-pocket costs, and the most typical donation or contribution of the clients beyond these costs is approximately \$2,500 with some being as high as \$5,000.

To ensure the quality of the projects and to protect the reputation of the Marketing Department, specific protocols have been developed by the authors and have been recommended to guide the departmental involvement with client-based projects.

Prior to a tentative agreement to take on a project from a client, the professor meets with the client, discusses the nature of the course, the level of the course, and what is required from the client in the form of information, support, and general attitude to the students who will end up working on the project. Clients are told that their project will be presented to the students as a potential learning experience, but no guarantees are made for the actual implementation of the project during that particular academic term. These potential clients are then briefed about the process and what to expect to happen if the project is accepted by students for that particular term.

ORGANIZING FOR SUCCESSFUL GROUP PROJECTS

The first class period of the academic term is set aside for introductions of the professor, his/her philosophy of teaching, the role of real-life projects in the overall classroom experience, and the general requirements of the course vis-à-vis the comprehensive course syllabus. Student introductions follow as well as a short presentation of each of the proposed real-life projects. Students then convene and confer with their peers and come prepared to select a project and organize their teams

The first task the group faces is to arrange for a meeting of the team with the client and the preparation of the formal proposal that follows the initial visit. Once signed by the students and the client, the document is protected by the team and is later included in the appendix of the

completed report. A copy of the proposal is kept at the department office to be used as the basis for billing the client. Normally, the client is requested to make a payment of approximately \$1000 dollars at the start of the project to be used for paying student expenses.

Halfway through the academic term, students are required to schedule their project presentation. Each team sends out formal invitations to the client, the School Dean, and Marketing faculty indicating the date, time, and place of the presentation. Students often take pride in the quality of the formal invitations and their group's communication strategies.

To help manage the client expectations, students are told to incorporate a time line for completion that will allow them benefit from a gain effect in their relationship with the client. In both oral and written communication, the students are to let the client know that although the presentation will take place on a certain date, the final report may not be ready for another two weeks. This allows the students to benefit from the Q & A session at the end of the presentation and gives them an opportunity to address some of the raised issues in the final report and deliver it several days in advance of the promised date.

Project workshops and team meetings are scheduled and implemented throughout the course to achieve project related tasks and to assess performance to date. Each team is to participate in a rehearsal prior to the public presentation to the client or their guests.

Following the group presentations, the team members convene to address the issues and to incorporate any suggestions that would have been received. At this time, every team member is asked to submit their confidential peer-evaluation form and any other outstanding invoices related to their work on the project.

CONCLUSION

It has been established and supported that real-life projects brings realism to marketing education; however the view of the authors is that this opportunity is not well utilized by educators, and reasons are attributed to (1) the required efforts in finding real life projects, and (2) few not necessarily difficult implementation issues.

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