

USING MARKETING CONCEPTS FOR EXPERIENTIAL SERVICE LEARNING: HELPING THE HOMELESS

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Abstract

This paper describes a project that has been conducted for several years in two different classes and by two different marketing professors. The project can be classified as service learning and it has helped the homeless people in Denver, Colorado, for nine years. The design of the project is also intended to give students a strong experiential learning opportunity as it requires them to use marketing principles to successfully conduct the project. It also gives the students an opportunity to have a strong and positive team experience as it brings students with diverse backgrounds together to provide a valuable service to a population that needs attention and service from public endeavors such as this. Though the class may fit best in a Social Marketing or even a Consumer Behavior class, its design that features many marketing principles allows it to be conducted in a wide variety of marketing classes.

Introduction

Service learning is broadly supported among institutions of higher education in the United States. Many colleges and universities have initiatives that encourage the inclusion of service learning in the classroom. Also, nearly two decades ago, the Education Commission of the United States started Campus Compact in an effort to create service opportunities for students and address the perceived moral decline of college students (Morton and Troppe 1996). Additionally, researchers support the inclusion of service learning into higher education as a way to improve the relevance of education and to address the needs of communities, particularly ones served by specific colleges and universities (Andrews 2007).

In addition to the recent push toward service learning, the importance of real-world (experiential) education in the business school classroom to complement traditional lecture experiences is being acknowledged (Govekar and Rishi 2007). Large corporations themselves recognize the need for more effective methods of training and education and have begun to adopt newer, active learning designs (e.g., Fritz, Kaestner, and Bergmann 2010). Some industries even recognize that hands-on, or experiential, education inspires students to become innovators (Almgren 2010). It is essential, then, that business schools in general, and marketing programs

specifically, heed these concerns and continue to utilize the most effective educational methods possible to provide students with necessary knowledge and skills.

Finally, many marketing educators regard teamwork in the classroom as a valuable learning opportunity. Benefits of utilizing a team approach in the marketing classroom are well documented (e.g., Crittenden, Crittenden, and Hawes 1999; Hutto, Black, and Frontczak 2011; Parsons and Lepkowska-White 2009).

This paper reports a project that combines these three important elements – service learning, experiential learning, and teamwork – in one project. The project – collecting coats to be donated to an organization servicing homeless people in Denver, Colorado – is designed to use important marketing concepts to accomplish its goals. Also, the design is flexible enough have the potential to provide a valuable experience in a variety of marketing classes.

Literature Review

Though service learning is defined slightly differently by many scholars, the definition that seems to capture the important elements is contained in the following statement by Bringle and Hatcher (1996).

We view service learning as a credit-bearing educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of the course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility. Unlike extracurricular voluntary service, service learning is a course-based service experience that produces the best outcomes when meaningful service activities are related to course material through reflection activities such as directed writings, small group discussions, and class presentations (p. 222).

This definition distinguishes between service learning and volunteerism and the traditional internship. Service learning is significant because it demonstrates reciprocity between the campus and the community, it represents an opportunity to provide students with specific academic learning experiences, and provides students with an opportunity to obtain and/or hone specific real-world skills (Holtzman, Stewart, and Barr 2008).

Significant benefits may be found in any type of learning experience; however, some benefits associated with service learning are unique. To achieve the desired learning outcomes, three essential elements should be included in the design of any service-learning assignment. These three elements are reality, reflection, and reciprocity (Godfrey, Illes, and Berry 2005). Reality enhances academic content in a real-world setting. It also refers to providing students with a deeper understanding of the social issues that exist within organizations and in the business environment, such as diversity, poverty, homelessness, and hunger. Reflection focuses on helping students understand how they are different after the service learning experience and forces students to think deeply and write cogently about how the service experience has affected them. Reciprocity addresses deficiencies in traditional transactional-based business education by encouraging students to engage in an open and mutually beneficial exchange between themselves and community partners. It provides the students with an opportunity to deepen the service experience as they become equal and trusted partners; they become able to see the origins and consequences of social issues more clearly (Yorio and Ye 2012).

Considering these three elements of service learning and if the assignment is properly designed, marketing professors should be able to expect three types of learning outcomes: personal insight, understanding social issues, and cognitive development (Kolenko et al. 1996). The learning outcome of personal insight helps a student get a more accurate perception of self. The outcome of understanding social issues provides an important frame of reference for a student that will guide decision making in terms of complex social issues. Finally, the learning outcome of cognitive development provides task and skill development for students and allows them to have a very real and positive academic achievement (Yorio and Ye 2012). An example of how service learning has been integrated in marketing classes is having students in an introductory marketing course develop marketing plans for nonprofit organizations (Klink and Athaide 2004).

Almost by definition, service learning assignments are experiential in nature (Holtzman, Stewart, and Barr 2008). Previous research has suggested that experiential learning provides more intense and more permanent learning (Wingfield and Black 2005). Experiential learning can be defined as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb 1983, p. 38). Kolb indicates the crucial first step is to provide the experience from which the learning comes. Experiential educators are generally aware that experiences alone are not inherently effective for learning. The experiences have to be relevant to the learning goals and then the learners must have time and opportunity to reflect on the

experience, which corresponds with the elements of service learning. Kolb's definition is based on six assumptions: "Learning (a) is a process, not an outcome; (b) derives from experience; (c) requires an individual to resolve dialectically opposed demands; (d) is holistic and integrative; (e) requires interplay between a person and the environment; and (f) results in knowledge creation"(from Kayes 2002, pp. 139-140). These assumptions intimate that learners will be required to respond "to diverse personal and environmental demands that arise from the interaction between experience, concept, reflection, and action in a cyclical ... fashion" (Kayes 2002, p.140).

Similar to service learning, general experiential methods rely heavily on discussion and practice, emphasizing personal application of material and encouraging students to develop belief systems, understand how they feel about an area of study, and take appropriate actions given a specific environment (Jones and Jones 1998). In addition, it is imperative that an experiential design be appropriate for the class and the concepts being taught (Frontczak 1998). Further, to provide a truly experiential opportunity, an assignment or entire class needs to have the necessary characteristics to make it experiential (Black and Wingfield 2008).

In addition to the learning concepts and outcomes described above for service learning and experiential learning, developing the skills of working efficiently and effectively with others of diverse backgrounds in groups is becoming mandatory for our marketing students (Chapman et al. 2010; Halfhill and Nielson 2007; Vance 2007; Widmier, Loe, and Selden 2007). Once graduating and working in the "real world," students will find that teams in today's business environment consistently outperform individuals acting alone in the completion of complex tasks requiring multiple skills and experiences levels (Chapman et al. 2010; Katzenbach and Smith 2003; Kozlowski and Ilgen 2006). To further emphasize the importance of these abilities, recent research indicates recruiters have begun to actively seek students who can demonstrate their ability to work well in a group (Alsop 2006; Fisher 2007; Vance 2007). In fact, many employers rank teamwork skills as one of the most important attributes of potential employees (Alsop 2004; Vance 2007).

From this literature review, the value of providing students with experiential service learning experiences in a teamwork format seems increasingly more important. It is also clear from the literature review that care should be taken when designing these experiential service learning assignments for students so they are relevant to the class and the concepts being taught, that they are benefitting the community and the college or university, that they are developing

important teamwork skills, and they are developing students' personal sense of self and codes of ethics.

The Project

The impetus of the project described in this paper started in a Promotional Strategy class where teams act as an advertising agency creating a campaign for an actual client (competing for an account). For this class, it is designed as a large semester-long and very involved project. At the beginning of the semester, the professor wanted to design a team-building exercise to create enthusiasm for the course and to get student teams working together on a stimulating, experiential learning exercise. Rather than doing a more standard, in-class exercise, getting the student teams involved in the community seemed a much more effective design. An organization that has been helping the homeless people of Denver, Colorado, for the past 120 years is known as the Denver Rescue Mission. Students can be very focused on themselves, resulting in self-absorption. This project was designed as a way to meet the course objectives and turn the students' focus outward by truly helping people.

Since this is a spring semester course, starting in January, in a cold weather climate, a coat drive used for a brief team-building project at the beginning of the semester, while the coats could still be used, seemed important. The duration of this project in this class is approximately three weeks. Specific goals for the project in this class were to 1) build team cohesiveness; 2) develop promotional skills and execute ideas (develop strategy, set goals, and execute the strategy), including branding strategies; 3) stimulate competitiveness, which is critical in agency work; 4) stress the importance of community involvement; 5) create cooperation within teams and in the class; 6) engender the spirit of competition as teams competed with one another for largest number of coats collected, and in later years, each class would compete with previous classes; and 7) stimulate student engagement, participation and enthusiasm.

Another class in which this project has been implemented is Social Marketing. Unlike the Promotion Strategy class where it originated, the project for this class was designed to last for about six weeks. In addition, the project for this class was a major assignment for the class and constituted the entire work students would accomplish while working in these teams. The goals for the assignment were nearly the same, but with more of an emphasis on becoming involved with the community and helping people in an altruistic fashion. Also, rather than just applying promotional concepts, the project in the Social Marketing class involved using skills related to a more complete set of marketing concepts, though promotion continued to be a key component.

Table 1. History of the Project

| # | Year | # Collected |
|--------------|-------------|--------------------|
| 1 | 2004 | 250 |
| 2 | 2005 | 75 |
| 3 | 2006 | 352 |
| 4 | 2007 | 186 |
| 5 | 2008 | 528 |
| 6 | 2009 | 647 |
| 7 | 2010 | 581 |
| 8 | 2011 | 436 |
| 9 | 2012 | 562 |
| Total | | 3617 |

In both classes, students learned to involve family and friends in the effort. Students utilized social media extensively by contacting people by email, through Facebook and LinkedIn, posting YouTube videos, etc. In the beginning, expectations were modest. For example, in the Social Marketing class, each one of the three 10-person teams was challenged to collect at least 50 coats to be eligible for the full points for that part of the project. That directive would result in a total of 150 coats that could be donated to the homeless. In every case, student enthusiasm and engagement completely surprised the professors overseeing these projects and the results were many more coats being collected and donated than either assigned or expected.

This originating professor of this project established a brand identity during the first year. The “Share the Warmth” Coat Drive has been a topic of conversation campus-wide since its inception and is an element attracting students to enroll in these marketing electives. Whether these classes consistently attract motivated students because of the coat drive or not, student achievement has far exceeded expectations. The “Share the Warmth” Coat Drive has now been conducted for nine years and has resulted in collecting and donating a total of 3,617 coats to the homeless of Denver (see Table 1). The students were very excited during the day when the coats were officially counted by the professors. Great enthusiasm was shown after the totals had been calculated and the winning teams identified. When the sense of competition was over, a tremendous spirit of cooperation was shown as the students teamed up as an entire class to get the coats transported to the Denver Rescue Mission. To end the project, in both classes and after the coats had been donated, students were asked to have small-group discussions in class to process the experience. They were then asked to individually produce a

written assignment describing their personal experiences and feelings, as both individuals and in relationship to their team experiences, and reflecting on the marketing skills they put to use to successfully complete the assignment.

It is clear that this assignment regularly accomplishes the specific goals of each class. However, it is also clear that it satisfies both the elements and learning outcomes of service learning. The three elements of service learning are apparent in this project. Reality is achieved by actually providing a service and product that can benefit real people in need. Reflection is provided for by the small-group discussions and written assignments at the end of the project. Reciprocity is achieved by the university being able to engage with an important organization in the community to help the organization's client population, and by establishing the brand name, the organization, as well as the university, become more well known for this type of work.

The three learning outcomes for service learning are also achieved in this project. Students learn to better appreciate the needs of the population being served. This appreciation is aided by the season during which the project is conducted, the winter, when the coats are most needed. Thus, the outcome of understanding this specific social issue is achieved. Students also commonly remark in their reflection papers that this was the most important project in which they have ever been involved. The occasional student will be involved for whom this project has little impact, but overall, students are impacted positively by their sense of being able to help those in need. This fact indicates that students are gaining valuable personal insight. Students also learn to plan a project, promote it by soliciting donations, and aim for specific achievement goals, depending on the course with which the project is associated. The application of these marketing skills suggests the cognitive development of students.

Discussion and Implications

The project described in this paper has been successfully integrated into two marketing courses – Promotional Management and Social Marketing. The results for the students, the professors, the university, the nonprofit organization, and its clients have been significantly positive and have surpassed the expectations of all. For both classes, careful project design assured these results and provided a valuable and long-term learning experience for students. Students were able to apply marketing concepts in a real-world situation and to see the project completely through from the planning stage to the successful completion of the project. The three learning

outcomes associated with service learning were achieved. Perhaps most importantly, most students had a brief taste of the feeling that altruistic actions are known to produce.

This project, with slight modifications, could easily be applied to a variety of marketing courses. It would not be recommended for the introductory marketing course because students need to at least understand some basic marketing concepts in order to be able to properly apply those concepts. However, in addition to the two classes in which it was applied, it could also be a useful project for an advertising class, a sales class, a consumer behavior class, an electronic marketing class, a social media marketing class, etc.

Plans to continue the annual “Share the Warmth” Coat Drive are in place. The current plans for the Spring 2013 Semester is to use this project as a primary team assignment for a services marketing class that will be offered in a two-week session at the beginning of January (called Winterim). By the time the MEA Conference occurs in April, the project in this class will be completed and discussion about it can also be included in the presentation and discussion.

References available upon request