

BEST-PRACTICE TEACHING WITH MARKETING SIMULATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Successful teaching with a large-scale, web-based, competitively dynamic, team-based marketing simulation is challenging, even for experienced instructors. Drawing on simulation design experience, extensive personal teaching experience in classroom-based and distance-learning modes in degree-granting and executive education programs, and direct “train-the-trainer” coaching experience with scores of instructors and indirectly with their 10,000+ marketing students with the LINKS simulations (<http://www.LINKS-simulations.com>) over the last nine years, the author summarizes best-practice insights for the design and execution of successful simulation-based marketing courses.

PERSPECTIVE

Best-practice teaching principles and practices for marketing simulations may conveniently be organized in a time-series framework:

- Course Design Best Practice
- Pre-Event Best Practice
- Within-Event Best Practice.

Given space constraints, only the most important best-practice teaching principles and practices with marketing simulations are discussed.

COURSE DESIGN BEST PRACTICE

The marketing simulation experience exists within a marketing course; a course is not exclusively about a simulation. Thus, the greatest single teaching challenge is to embed the simulation successfully in the course. Do so by bringing the simulation into class sessions, as the simulation relates to a class-session topic. For example, use regular 10-15 minute class-time chunks to explore and spotlight aspects of the simulation (e.g., a key table or exhibit from the simulation manual, a particular simulation financial report, or particular simulation marketing research study).

If the 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. And, depending on course format (e.g., with a once-per-week three-hour evening class), 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 decision rounds throughout the course).

Course design includes student assessment. Best-practice teaching includes:

- Some grade allocation 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 team-based written reports and presentations.

Marketing simulations place the instructor in an on-going within- and outside-of classroom coaching role, in contrast to the traditional “front-of-the-classroom” instructor role. This coaching role may be the best part of the simulation teaching experience for instructors. It is an on-going, hands-on, consulting-oriented marketing laboratory.

PRE-EVENT BEST PRACTICE

Four to six firms in a simulation “industry” (with multiple, independent industries in larger-sized classes) and team sizes of “about” four members are usually good guidelines. Four-member teams are sufficient human resources for the task at hand, while not being so large as to unduly stress students in effectively managing themselves and their teams.

While many instructors adopt the expedient approach of requiring 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 “vetoes” of up to two class members with whom a student does not wish to be teamed). Instructor-formed simulation teams offer plentiful benefits:

- It is realistic (there is usually no choice in team assignments in working-world teams).
- It is equitable (everyone has the same chance of being teamed with “friends” and “strangers”).
- It is efficient (equal-sized teams are conveniently created by the instructor and students do not have to worry about finding a team to work with).

- It is diverse (diverse teams can be created across student backgrounds, majors, native English-speaking status, employer, and gender).

WITHIN-EVENT BEST PRACTICE

The most important within-event best-practice in teaching successfully with marketing simulations is scheduling private presidential review meetings with the teams. These are private, pre-scheduled, 30-minute meetings with each team to permit the instructor to review a team's business and performance, to answer team members' questions, and to sense the progress that teams are making in the simulation. This is a "one-with-a-few" style of teaching/coaching, rather than the "one-to-the-masses" lecture-hall style of 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 different kind of 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 involved.

In shorter events, a single round of review meetings might be scheduled, perhaps just before (or no later than just after) the second scheduled decision round. In longer events, several waves of presidential review meetings might be scheduled with the second round of presidential review meetings occurring at about the event's mid-point.

Private meeting space is required, including the regular course classroom, for presidential meetings scheduled during class hours.

Pre-scheduled meetings permit teams to pick their own preferred meeting times from a range of available meeting times. Classroom-hours meeting times might be rotated around all teams, if multiple presidential review meetings waves are held. With a single set of presidential review meetings, assign classroom-hours meetings randomly.

Formats for presidential review meetings include:

- No Student Preparation Required [Not Recommended]: Just discussion and Q&A.
- Some Student Preparation [Recommended]: Team members collaborate and submit (via e-mail) questions/issues to be discussed. Submissions are due at least 12 hours before the scheduled presidential review meeting to permit the instructor time to review and prepare.
- Substantial Student Preparation [Optional]: SWOT Analysis. Submissions due at least 24 hours before the scheduled presidential review meeting to permit instructor review and prep.

Some potential instructor questions to pose during presidential review meetings include:

- What are the largest problems facing your firm?
- What is your best and worst team decision to date? Why?
- Who is the best performing competitor in your industry? Why?
- To your customers, what differential advantage does your firm offer compared to competitors?
- What are your most/least important markets?
- How is your firm organized (e.g., by function, by region, as a committee of the whole, etc.)? Is this organization arrangement "best" for the problems and challenges facing your firm now?

The likely outcomes arising from presidential review meetings include:

- For Students: (1) Greater emphasis on research study needs going forward. (2) More attention to issue identification and prioritization. (3) More focus on the really important issues. (4) More systematic attention to division of labor and responsibility assignments.
- For Instructors: (1) Deep appreciation for team and individual-student progress. (2) Ideas for in-class discussion and tutorials, based on common issues and concerns arising across teams. (3) Follow-up meeting scheduling for "lost"/"deeply troubled"/"unprepared" teams.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

These are not the only best-practice principles and practices when teaching with large-scale, web-based, competitively dynamic, team-based marketing simulations. But, they are the most important best practices. Embracing these best practices in course design and execution with marketing simulations improves the chances of a good/better teaching, instruction, and learning experience for instructors and for their students.