LEVERAGING MARKETING EDUCATION THROUGH ENTREPRENEURSHIP INITIATIVES: THE CASE OF A SWISS UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES

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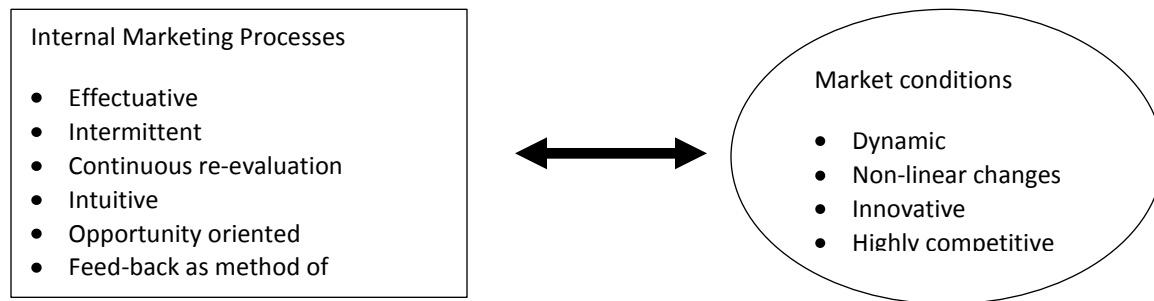
Abstract

This paper looks at one of the important applied teaching pilot initiatives of the University of Applied Sciences Western Switzerland in the field of business creation and particularly its repercussions on marketing knowledge acquisition. Using an entrepreneurship competition as a vehicle, it builds on other groundbreaking teaching initiatives such as immersive virtual reality company creation or case teaching, to reinforce the acquisition of marketing practice with the goal of helping marketing knowledge to become marketing competency. Given that marketing in an entrepreneurial setting can be considered a core function of the company, its practice deserves particular attention in applied education settings where developing competence is a basic mission.

Introduction

In this paper, we discuss a recent applied teaching initiative of the University of Applied Sciences Western Switzerland (UASWS) in the field of business creation. The initiative takes the form of a business creation program entitled 'Prix Genilem HES' (PGH). It follows other initiatives underway at the university to innovate marketing education such as the assignment of creating a company in a virtual world to apply marketing theory (Emad & Wydler, 2010) or the immersive virtual reality case teaching method developed at the UASWS's School of Business Administration, which transforms paper-based case studies into an immersive team-based hunt for case information in a virtual world and is described in Halvorson & Emad (2012) and. Live case study teaching appears as an effective means of developing 'hard' or more technical/strategic skills yet somewhat less so for the ever so important 'soft' or behavioral skills such as effective communication, organizational skills and leadership (Culpin & Scott, 2012). These are skills which tend to develop over time and with exposure to one's environment. Our focus will be on the marketing knowledge acquisition impact of the PGH program on across the school's diverse student population. Given the contextual nature of marketing, it is important to adapt the teaching context to the competencies that are to be developed (Peterson & Albertson, 2006). Particular attention needs to be paid to the entrepreneurial setting where many key business activities are enmeshed by the realities of the small size (or lack) of structures,

Figure 1: Entrepreneurial Behavior Fits Well with Marketing Needs in Highly Competitive Markets' (adapted from Hultman, C. & Hills, G., 2011)

Internal Marketing Processes

- Effectuative
- Intermittent
- Continuous re-evaluation
- Intuitive
- Opportunity oriented
- Feed-back as method of

Market conditions

- Dynamic
- Non-linear changes
- Innovative
- Highly competitive

whereas in a traditional enterprise setting, marketing is commonly a distinct organizational function such as finance and HRM. A strong case has been made to enrich mainstream marketing practice with an Entrepreneurial Marketing (EM) approach because it provides the agility and continual focus on maximizing customer value, which are important in unstable and highly competitive markets (Hultman & Hills, 2011). Figure 1 illustrates the strong fit between certain tenets of EM and current market conditions. More importantly, in the entrepreneurial setting itself, Marketing as a driver of growth is ultimately about survival (Stokes, 2000 and Hills et.al., 2008) and is in many ways a core competency of the firm. Given the strong personal engagement in their ventures, this may explain why the 'social [and] personal activity' of marketing is often 'what many entrepreneurs are passionate about' (Hills et.al., 2008).

Promoting Marketing Education through Entrepreneurship Initiatives

The PGH compels students to apply prospective marketing techniques to real-life projects that are of personal importance to them and which are subsequently evaluated by business experts and industry leaders. This particular form of application reinforces the acquisition of marketing practice with the goal of it becoming competency; in other words, endeavoring to avoid the 'gap between what learners learn and what happens when they try to apply their learning in their real-world context' (Tate, 2004). As pointed out by Hisrich (1992), 'Entrepreneurs are often poor planners and managers, frequently underestimating the time and effort needed to accomplish a marketing task and overestimating the resulting sales'. Having to undertake marketing activities within the guided framework of the prize and subsequent coaching helps the participants to recognize this fact early on in their projects which has the double positive effect of reinforcing the importance of the techniques as well as forcing them to take a critical look at their expected returns.

Whether born or made, it is common to assert that even the best entrepreneurs can improve their skill sets (Henry, 2005) in customer-focused domains and Marketing is probably one of the

most "contentious", especially in the more Cartesian disciplines such as engineering. A certain, almost natural, antagonism exists between engineers and the marketing practice (Keaveny, 2008; Shaw and Shaw, 1998; and Shaw et.al., 2003), however, it has been shown that engineers often have a strong desire for Marketing training which is not met (Shaw et.al., 2003) and gaps between engineering and marketing can be bridged (Lueg & Molen 2010).

Another important reason for promoting such initiatives is the emerging fact that in our innovation-based economies the likelihood that we will need to demonstrate strong intrapreneurial skills is quite high. To meet this need, it is increasingly recognized that higher education needs to embrace approaches 'that [seek] to empower graduates with the knowledge and skills of the entrepreneur rather than those focused around simply "getting a job"' (Culkin & Mallick, 2010). Switzerland typically scores highly on international competitiveness rankings because of its strong innovation capacity (WEF, 2011). Perhaps counter-intuitively, we observe that in the Geneva region, the student participation rate in business creation-related activities is very low. This lower propensity toward entrepreneurship among higher education students is partly explained by lower entrepreneurial intentions in the general population (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2011), along with other factors, which we will not discuss here, except to conclude that cultural aspects play an important role and to note that the average age of entrepreneurs in Switzerland is 45 (FHNW, 2009), which is substantially older than the average university population. Other innovation-based economies show similar trends.

Digital immersive teaching methodologies are emerging as a relevant teaching tool for many of the digital natives who spend a significant amount of their free time on electronic gaming (e.g. Panoutsopoulos, H. et al, 2011; Mc Farane, 2001; Kerriemuir et al, 2004; Gee, 2003). At some point, however, it is necessary to make the transition back to the real world with real people; real business. As mentioned above, the UASWS's Geneva School of Business Administration offers final-year students the possibility to follow a program that allows them to create virtual enterprises in Second Life (Emad & Wydler, 2010). As a way of easily implementing and testing different student and instructor choices, it is a particularly useful and cost effective method of reinforcing awareness in marketing and in business model engineering.

As a next step, students are able to participate in the PGH program, which puts them on the track of creating their own enterprise based on a personal project that they might, for example have begun to explore in their bachelor thesis. In essence, it involves taking their idea from its very early stages through to actually putting their company on the market.

About the Partners

The UASWS is Switzerland's largest University of Applied Sciences with an undergraduate student body of over 18'000 students spread across 27 campuses in 6 different Cantons (States) and as many faculties (Business, Management & Services; Engineering & Architecture; Design & Fine Arts; Health; Social Work; and Music). It provides a heterogeneous student population and an interesting testing ground for the program.

Genilem is a not-for-profit association of seasoned business coaches whose goal is to identify promising new ventures and increase their chances of success through their coaching methods. They act as mentors, helping the budding entrepreneurs to evolve through the different stages of business creation with their shared experience of the business aspects of their project.

Description of the Program

The project was born from an informal meeting between the Geneva regional General Director of the UASWS and the then President of Genilem during which was discussed the untapped reservoir of creative knowledge hidden in their student's research projects as well as the measures that could be taken to stimulate entrepreneurial behavior in their schools. A large number of student research projects in the UASWS do little more than "gather dust" because the students lack confidence in their ability to bring their ideas to market. It was subsequently decided that a useful response to this opportunity would be to implement a business creation prize open to all of the Geneva schools of the UASWS. This form was chosen because it allows the participants to build on all the formal training acquired during their studies but also to develop critical market-going soft skills in the process such as preparing and delivering a convincing elevator pitch. The two-phase structure of the program recognizes the heterogeneous business and marketing skills of the different student populations:

The first phase requires participants to structure their ideas around a market focus and then pitch their business concept to a committee comprised of both academics and professional start-up coaches. This first phase draws mostly on the participants' existing soft skills such as their personal communication capabilities as well as their perspective on the commercial aspects of their project.

The second phase of the project is limited to those candidates who were able to demonstrate a convincing ability to communicate their product/marketing idea. In this second phase, candidates are first given additional training on business planning in a seminar which takes a

very pragmatic and context specific focus on the marketing aspects. Participants are then given a period of two months, over the summer break, in order to build their project's business plan. This gives them sufficient time to go out onto the field and carry out a useful market analysis. Once completed, the business plan is defended in front of a jury of seasoned professionals from the region including senior managers from large banks, multinational corporations, professional services firms, and other highly visible personalities such as the president of the Chamber of commerce, and well known journalists specialized in small and medium enterprises. The jury does not include experts in any of the technologies being presented. The participants are aware that they will be presenting to business people, not technical people. This first obliges them to have validated the technical feasibility of their project before submitting the Business Plan. Next, and most importantly, it is a very strong incentive for them to strictly focus their approach on the important market-related aspects.

The significant innovation in this program is that the winning projects at the business plan level are awarded seed capital and, more importantly; they enter into a 3 years of coaching program with the university's partner organization during which the company is incorporated and ultimately coached into a viable company. The steps of the program not only reinforce hard skills but the interaction with industry professionals and professional start up coaches help to provide a "mirror" to help the candidate develop his soft skills.

Results

The program set out to involve students from all faculties and stimulate business creation activities within the schools. A first measure of success is to note that until now, all of the different faculties have participated at least once in the program. It was found that students from the school of design have a more innate understanding of the importance of marketing than other participating students. On the other hand, students from the schools of engineering, social work, Nursing, Health, and Music have systematically demonstrated significant disconnect from the need to bring their product/service to market despite most of them having some management training modules in their final years. Much of that training tends to focus more heavily on more intra-preneurial management topics such as project management, negotiation skills and financial literacy.

In terms of innovation, more than half of the projects presented have been commercial innovations with an extra 30% concerning technical or technological innovation. However, in terms of marketing competence, almost surprisingly, it was the more technical projects that

produced better customer focus. The more commercial innovation based projects, strangely didn't seem to evolve as much. The design-based project carriers demonstrated less progression during the program, but started with a relatively high level of competence.

All of the startups actually created at the issue of the business plan phase are still active and all, but one (which experienced technological development issues and subsequent delays), were able to quickly generate a client base.

In general, Students from the schools of engineering and Business Administration fared better in the hard marketing skill, whereas it was those from the schools of Design and Business Administration who demonstrated better soft skills. This is probably more linked to the students own personalities but engineering students typically do not have to present ideas orally to non-engineers, whereas business and design students are required to prepare and give frequent presentations throughout the course of their studies. One other side effect of the program is that since its creation, many other initiatives have been emerging, including within the student body.

The first companies will shortly be reaching the end of their three-year coaching period.

Facing Resistance

We observed that the music and social work students tend to stereotypically consider the world of business and marketing as somewhat distasteful and resist any form of participation in such programs. This resistance appears to go beyond the students and originates with the schools' teaching staff themselves. Despite fundamental support from the head of the university, the school of music effectively discourages participation by its students by informing them that "it's not for them".

Limitations of the Program and Further Room for Research

Generating awareness and thus effective marketing awareness needs buy-in on behalf of the faculty, the example of the schools of music and health care have illustrated this point, which should push the organizers to rethink the way the school staff is engaged. Perhaps the most important limitation of the program is its scalability. Without highly motivated participants committed to seeing the process through to its end, the impact in terms of knowledge acquisition may be difficult to ascertain. It is also rather costly in its current forms

The program is now being used as a target among the different schools for the creation of new initiatives. At the time of writing, one of the departments of the school of engineering has abandoned part of its traditional disciplines-based management training in favor of a pilot program which follows a similar holistic approach and the final deliverable is to provide a selection of projects suitable to be included in the PGH program.

Despite the success of the program, in developing tangible marketing competences to those student populations having a more innate understanding of the need to adopt a marketing approach, further work is needed to increase the transfer to those other students who struggle to let go of their product or technology-centric approach.

<div align="center">References available upon request</div>