MARKETING CAPSTONE MODELS "THE APPRENTICE" TELEVISION SHOW WITH CLIENT-SPONSORED PROJECTS

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ABSTRACT

The marketing major capstone course provides students with a comprehensive application of previously-learned concepts and is an important transition for students into the work place. The capstone integrates the marketing mix, translates concepts into practice, provides real-life marketing experience, stimulates creative and flexible thinking, and provides managerial experience and interaction with peers (Haas & Wotruba, 1979). Instructors achieve these goals through various pedagogical methods: lectures, in-class discussions, case studies, computer simulations (Clow & Wachter, 1996) and client-sponsored projects.

Case analysis, computer simulations, and client sponsored projects (CSPs) employ constructivist learning tenets (Ganesh & Sun, 2009). CSPs involve a local business or non-profit presenting a problem for students to solve. Many marketing classes use CSPs, providing additional benefits beyond cases and simulations because they allow for a deeper level of learning co-creation, real consequences, and relationships with clients. This realism increases student motivation (Fox, 2002).

This paper describes a unique client sponsored project format for a marketing capstone course, paralleling the popular television show "The Apprentice." This show employs sixteen contestants competing in short term projects to become an apprentice to business magnate, Donald Trump, with the winner earning a $250,000 annual salary and eventually one contestant being eliminated with Trump's now famous phrase: "You're fired."

The marketing capstone course uses all these elements except for the winning salary and the worst player proclamation: "You're failed." It provides a dynamic, highly competitive independent learning environment where students must solve a series of real marketing problems in three to four weeks each. The first client presents a problem on day one in the class and teams of five to seven students must decide what they need to learn or review from previous classes to solve the problem. A few weeks later student teams present their recommendations to a panel of clients and receive grades partially based on the clients' competitive ranking of the teams. In other projects, students receive grades partially based on actual results – votes or dollars sold.

This class has no exams or canned lectures and little assigned reading. Occasionally a guest speaker assists the students or the instructor offers mini lectures when questioned by students, but more often the instructor consults individually with teams, who meet during the entire class time. Projects are not revealed until the client comes to class for the kick-off, when students are given a task brief as a handout, including the challenge objectives, specific instructions and rules, and the required deliverables.

The project deliverables vary from selling memberships to the college alumni association and obtaining free gifts for a charity raffle to ten page marketing plans or SWOT analyses with primary and secondary research driven recommendations. In one example a dog wash project was used to raise funds for the local Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA). Students had to design the entire marketing mix, prepare a break-even analysis, and wash dogs on a Saturday. The winning team located next to an upscale pet store and got them to both promote it and donate products for a raffle. This team raised over $700 in a 3 hour period, and the entire class raised over $2100 for the SPCA. This demonstrated effective target marketing and resulted in publicity in the local newspaper. The course evaluation scheme places 20% of the course grade on the individually done reading deliverables and 80% on the four client-sponsored project challenges. Each task was evaluated as follows: 1) the team's final oral and/or written deliverable (solution to the client problem) as evaluated by the professor (20%), 2) an individual debriefing memo explaining what the team did well and poorly, and connecting the challenge to previously learned marketing concepts (50%), 3) the team's competitive position as judged by the client, votes, or funds raised (15%), and 3) peer evaluations (where students were forced to rank team members) (15%). This type of competitive evaluation closely simulates the real world and motivates students to work hard.

References Available on Request