

## DEVELOPING IN MARKET CASE STUDIES FOR ADVERTISING STUDENTS

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### ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the capstone course in undergraduate advertising studies at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff. Students in this course are split into competing agency teams, each of which attempt to win a client's account. Unlike many case studies classes, the "winning" campaign is ultimately produced and run in the media which provides the student with an important portfolio piece and valuable "real world" experience. This paper discusses two of the initial "in-market cases" which were sponsored by America West Airlines and Dial soap.

### INTRODUCTION

Advertising can be a difficult discipline to teach because it requires both a theoretical base and "hands on" experience in order to really understand the subject. While the theory lends itself well to the classroom environment, the practical application generally is not experienced until the student graduates and is in an entry level position. Metaphorically, the student is the raw material which will be transformed into a finished product (Christ 1990) much the way a campaign transforms from concept to a finished piece of advertising. Students who have never been exposed to the "real world" may be dumbfounded by the roller coaster nature of the industry, where a delicate balance between exhilaration and frustration is often the norm.

There are a variety of means to help the student become prepared for careers in industry. Some universities have strong internship programs with major clients and agencies, others utilize the student ad agency, and others focus on industry case studies. Each of these methods has merits and shortcomings. Many times internships are loosely administered and students may spend the semester acting as a "go-for" rather than involved in development and execution of advertising; student run agencies can offer excellent hands on experience but generally service very small local accounts with little exposure to strategy or conceptual thinking. Additionally, student-run agencies may approximate learning situations, but the fact remains that they are principally laboratory exercises; they do not transcend the classroom; and case studies can offer good conceptual work, but don't provide the excitement and

agonies of implementation (Morris and Istre 1986).

Between these tried and true techniques is a modification of all three--the in-market study. This paper discusses the capstone course offered at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, an applied case study approach called Advertising Campaign Competition.

Team projects in the study of advertising are nothing new, but the NAU capstone course offers an important twist. The class is broken randomly into competing "agency teams", each consisting of 5-7 individuals. There are no tests or exams in the class..there isn't even a textbook. The entire semester's activity is focused around "winning" the new account for the team.

### SELECTING A SPONSOR

Prior to the start of the semester, the instructor solicits for sponsors. The sponsors agree upfront to participate for a minimum of one semester, and in many cases two semesters. The sponsors agree to act as the client during the first semester and conduct a brand review and to attend the final presentations. If the sponsor is satisfied with the "winning" campaign they further agree to go into production during the next semester and run the campaign in the media. This is an important component, because it allows the students to compete for a "real" piece of business which ultimately can be put into their portfolios.

It also brings the project full circle, in showing the sequence of events from conceptualization to in-market placement. Because advertising is generally taught in the context of vocational and technical training (Stewart 1986) and experience which brings the project full circle is valuable.

The selection of a sponsor is a critical decision in the success of this program. Potential sponsors should be screened for the following: (1) their willingness to meet with the student teams at least twice during the semester; (2) market a brand or service which has high levels of awareness; (3) competes in the consumer market; (4) already has

advertising in place which runs in a variety of media; and (5) is willing to pledge the resources to produce and run the winning campaign. Industry contacts become critical in obtaining sponsorships, and the instructor should endeavor to use local ad clubs, marketing organizations, internship sponsors and alumni as recruiting pools.

An important consideration is the reputation of the sponsor. high profile sponsors, such as major consumer brands are of greatest value to the students because: (1) they have good internal data and resources available; (2) they generally operate their businesses with long-term strategy in place; and (3) their "halo" effect for the student can be enormous. Because students tend to leave the local market after graduation, being able to show a portfolio project for a well known sponsor like Dial soap has much more impact than for a small local advertiser.

The ability to have strong portfolio material is critical in obtaining the first job (England 1987). While many graduates will not be placed in the largest agencies on national brands, the student's tenacity can pay off and initial job placement in a small to midsize agency is a reasonable goal (Marra 1990). Presumably, the student's ability to demonstrate problem solving abilities for an in-market project will translate to the ability to solve advertising problems once they are placed in industry.

#### THE FIRST TWO "IN-MARKET" CASES AT NAU

The first two projects implemented in this capstone course at NAU were sponsored by America West Airlines during 1988-89 and Dial soap during 1989-90. Each campaign proved to be both challenging and motivating for the students..and a lot of work.

America West Airlines, a Phoenix based regional air carrier, agreed to sponsor the first campaign and back the winner with a media and production budget of \$5,000. For perspective, this translates to a national rate of \$2,000,000. The campaign's objective was to improve load factors for inbound and outbound flights servicing Flagstaff. In order to coincide with peak traveling months, the campaign was scheduled to run during the Spring of 1989.

A total of thirty seniors enrolled in the class which was split into five competing agency teams. Each team was selected by first pooling those students who were

interested in specific agency functions and then blending each functional group into each of the competing teams. This way each team was balanced with members who were specifically interested in all four of an advertising agency's functional areas (media, research, creative and account service). Teams were required to meet with the instructor once per week to review a status report and then could meet independently at their own discretion.

Early in the semester, America West management conducted a client meeting at the university and provided detailed marketing, advertising, and competitive information. America West carefully postured themselves as a demanding client who would not accept below-standard work from anyone including students. Student teams were expected to conduct their own research, develop a creative strategy, formulate media plans and ultimately recommend creative executions.

America West pledged to back the campaign with a \$5,000 budget if they believed the winning campaign to be executable and well conceived. Presentations were scheduled to the client in December, 1988 prior to the semester break.

The semester was divided into a series of building block assignments, each designed to move the student teams through the campaign development process, and to culminate with the client presentations. Student teams were required to provide:

- (1) a thorough situation analysis demonstrating an understanding of the client's business and competition;
- (2) a minimum of three creative strategies based on the findings of the situation analysis and identify:
  - communication objective
  - target audience definition
  - key benefit statements and support points
- (3) a recommended media plan which includes:
  - media and day part recommendations
  - reach, frequency and GRP goals
  - working and nonworking media budget calculations, and
  - scheduling and flighting recommendations.

- (4) a minimum of three campaigns utilizing at least two different mediums; and
- (5) identification of a recommended campaign with adequate rationale.

### THE ROLE OF THE INSTRUCTOR

The role of the instructor became that of a facilitator and consultant. At regular intervals, team leaders and the instructor met to discuss progress and issues relating to the campaign. One of the first frustrations which most teams experienced was the inconsistent level of work contributions made by team members. As is the case in the real world, assignments needed to be shifted to the most reliable committee members, and away from those who simply were not particularly dependable. The instructor also acted as a conduit between the student teams and the client, filtering out questions which were not well thought out, and channeling the more relevant ones along.

It was important for students to be free to make their own decisions, and in some cases misinterpretation of data. This helped them later see inconsistencies in data which were not obvious at first, and to make necessary corrections.

### PREPARING FOR PRESENTATIONS

Presentation rehearsals were scheduled to begin approximately 10 days prior to the client meeting with overheads, creative board mock-ups, and other presentation materials required. Student teams were also required to provide the client a leave behind document which contained each of the major section write-ups. It is important to note that grading of each section provided valuable input for the students, and that they were encouraged to resubmit corrected sections throughout the semester. As is the case in the "real world", rewriting is an important process which adds perspective to a document.

Student teams were each allowed 45 minutes to make presentations. Each team was video taped and reviewed later for critique purposes. The client had expected the student teams to be strongest in creative and weakest in the situation analysis section. Interestingly, the opposite was true in that students did an excellent job in understanding the complexities of the market and in defining positioning alternatives for America West, and developing rather ordinary creative executions.

The winning campaign was chosen largely on the strength of the marketing analysis and overall thoroughness of the project. The goal of communicating that "California is Closer than Ever" was highly executable and allowed focus around America West strengths (convenient scheduling, amenities, and large comfortable planes).

After reviewing the presentations and leave-behind materials, America West agreed to sponsor the project through the production and placement of media. Creative refinements were completed in February, 1989, production followed, and the campaign ran in May, 1989. Each student was encouraged to retain a copy of their final "client book" to be used as an interviewing piece after graduation.

The Dial soap project was executed in much the way as America West. In many regards, this was an easier campaign for students to develop because they had the advantage of working with a physical product, so they could conduct store checks, organize use tests, and conduct focus groups.

Dial management approved use of a campaign entitled "Dialog" designed to improve brand share in the Western US, which is a relatively underdeveloped area. Like America West, Dial attended a presentation at the end of the Fall semester where the student team recommendations were made. Dial also agreed to proceed on the production and media placement segment of the project, and during the Spring of 1990, students enrolled in the second phase and began production of newspaper advertising targeted at college students. Coupon bearing ads ran in Flagstaff and Tucson, Arizona during May-June, 1990.

### GRADING CRITERIA

Grading this course was completed against a predetermined list of criteria which was agreed to by the sponsor and instructor. Key elements included:

- I. Situation Analysis            20 points
  - did the team understand the market?
  - did they draw reasonable conclusions?
  - did they identify a key advertising problem?

- II. Creative Strategy 20 points  
 -did strategy flow from their analysis?  
 -did they clearly identify a target market?  
 -did they identify a meaningful benefit?  
 -did they provide adequate support for their strategy?
- III. Media Plan 20 points  
 -did they spend within their budget?  
 -did their media and market selections make sense?  
 -did they generate reasonable levels of reach and frequency?
- IV. Creative Executions 20 points  
 -did executions flow from recommended strategy?  
 -did the creative translate between mediums?  
 -did it "make sense"..was it reasonable?
- V. Presentation/  
 Professionalism 20 points  
 -did the team appear well rehearsed and professional?  
 -did they appear confident/poised?  
 -did they answer questions well?

Total 100 points

Score sheets with these five criteria were furnished to the sponsor and instructor and completed after each presentation. This section was worth 60% of the semester grade. This could be construed as a "team" grade. The remaining 40% of the semester grade was generated by each team member, as they graded their individual performance, and that of their other team members for quality and quantity of work contributed during the semester.

#### STUDENT PERCEPTIONS

Student perceptions were measured by those enrolled in the course. When asked to evaluate this course on a 5 point scale (5 being highest/best) students ranked this course among the best they had taken in college. As listed below, students worked hard and learned a lot.

Verbatims from the course were extremely positive, with students citing their approval of this hands-on approach:  
 "..this course is really invaluable to my field..  
 "..I have hands-on experience that most other classes don't.."

Student Perceptions	Mean Score	As Compared to Other NAU Courses
Application of Principles & Theories	4.9	high
Thinking and Problem Solving	4.7	high
Personal Responsibility	4.7	high
Amount of Non-reading Work	4.6	high
Student worked hard	4.8	high
Improved Attitude toward field	4.8	high
Development of Creative Capacities	4.8	high

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Shortly after May 1990 graduation, one student called me from Los Angeles where he had just obtained an entry level account management position at Grey Advertising. He presented his "Dial book" as part of his initial interview which impressed management and was scheduled for callback interviews, and ultimately offered a position. While not everyone who finished a course like this will be offered a job on the spot, they will be better able to speak with conviction about the advertising process from its conceptualization to placement. Students will have a better grasp on what the real world holds for them, and should be better able to begin a career on the right foot. People who hire people in advertising by people. They buy presentability. Salesmanship. Problem solving promise marketing acumen. They buy qualities (Schulte 1987).

By giving our students the opportunity to experience an "in-market" project, we bridge the transition between college and the "real world". And, in a nutshell, that's what teaching advertising is all about.

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