

BUILDING A SUCCESSFUL MBA ELECTIVE COURSE

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ABSTRACT

Marketing educators are called upon to undertake a variety of tasks. One of the most important of these tasks is the development of MBA electives that add value to the overall curriculum. This is especially true at institutions that value student learning. This paper will examine the building of a long-term, successful MBA elective course and what is required to maintain the course.

BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

In 1983 a directive from the Dean of the School of Business set into motion the building of a MBA elective course that over the years has sustained momentum and grown. The directive was to “think outside the box and come up with a new course.” That directive resulted in the development of a new special topics course entitled, “Marketing Mistakes”. The course expanded the MBA offerings by utilizing a new, innovative delivery method. Instead of the conventional delivery of the MBA schedule of one night over a semester, the course would experiment with a Friday evening and all day Saturday delivery. The idea was to build a course around a three weekend Friday night Saturday format. The delivery and learning in this format would be compressed into three intensive weekend sessions, instead of the traditional semester long class. This “out of the box” thinking was immediately viewed by skepticism by colleagues. No one had ever offered a class with this radical structure. No one believed it could succeed – except the Dean who encouraged experimentation. Today, this delivery method does not seem innovative. However, in 1983 this was a huge departure from the norm.

School policy mandated that if an MBA elective course did not meet a certain enrollment requirement and failed to “make”, the faculty member would be responsible for making up the hours in his/her contractual obligation. In 1983, the contractual teaching load was 24 hours. Clearly, there was a risk to faculty members in undertaking an experimental course. If the course failed, then a faculty member would have to teach in the summer uncompensated. Undeterred by youth and naivety, the challenge to build a course around a delivery time was undertaken with enthusiasm.

The delivery time constraint led to the first decision in building the course. The content would utilize marketing cases in presenting the material. It was theorized that marketing cases could be analyzed and discussed effectively in this compressed, intensive manner. The challenge was to find an MBA level, marketing case text book to utilize in the course. Today, this would not a valid concern. In 1983 it was almost impossible. The traditional lengthy and quantitative case format, utilized by most textbooks of the era, was not an option for the obvious reason of the compressed time frame. A search of the available textbooks was undertaken. That led to the discovery of *Marketing Mistakes*, 2nd edition by Robert Hartley. Immediately the search for a text was over. *Marketing Mistakes* was and still is the perfect book for this class. The cases presented were interesting, mostly written about consumer product companies, and easily understood. All the companies utilized were commonly known by students. Instead of the camouflaged names and data that many case books utilized, Hartley presented real company names, financial data and updates.

Marketing Mistakes was not only the perfect book for the class, it became a great name for the class. As a special topics MBA offering, the title of the class was critically important in conveying the nature of the class. A good name was also necessary to create interest in the new offering. Immediately, MBA students were intrigued by the title of the class and the intensive format.

Mistakes, made by large, well-respected companies, drew much more attention than the successes by many of the same companies. Robert Hartley also wrote a book entitled, *Marketing Successes*. It was only available for two editions versus *Marketing Mistakes & Successes*, which is currently in its eleventh edition. Years later when the decision to make “Marketing Mistakes” a regular MBA elective course, rather than a special topics offerings, the title came under scrutiny by the new Dean of the School of Business. It was his assessment that the title was “not academic enough to warrant becoming a regular class offering.” The enrollment data, student comments made on teaching evaluations, word of mouth support and enthusiasm from MBA students and alumni changed his mind.

“Marketing Mistakes” has been taught every spring semester in a three weekend format since 1984, except for 2002 (sabbatical semester for the instructor). The class has developed into the most successfully enrolled MBA elective offering in School history, as well as the longest running offering. Spring 2009 saw another record elective enrollment of thirty-five students drawing from the general MBA program, the MBA with marketing certificate and the Masters of Technology MBA program. The instructor has never had to teach in the summer to makeup the hours. The risk of teaching an experimental course has been replaced with a tremendously rewarding and enriching course.

DEVELOPING A SUCCESSFUL CLASS

So how do you build a successful MBA elective? The following tips should help answer that question.

1. **Start with a compelling class name.** As with any product, a compelling name is a big part of a product’s success. Recent books such as: *All Marketers are Liars*, *Marketing Genius* and *The Marketing Mavens*, all offer intriguing possibilities for a great class names. The current class name has evolved to “Marketing Mistakes and Strategic Successes” to reflect the nature of Hartley’s book. In 1998 Robert Hartley refocused his book to reflect mistakes, turnarounds and successes. Since 1998 with the seventh edition all the editions have been entitled, *Marketing Mistakes & Successes*.
2. **Utilize unique class time formats.** While online formats have become frequent and successful, the focus of this discussion is the traditional MBA classes setting. The unique time offering can be risky, but can also offer an opportunity for less overlap with required courses.
3. **Utilize engaging, compelling and interesting course content.** *Marketing Mistakes & Successes*, 10th Edition, was the main casebook Spring, 2009. In addition a popular press book has always been required. *Marketing Genius* was the popular press book required in spring, 2009. The utilization of a popular press book should reinforce the fact that marketing is important and discussed in all circles, not simply MBA programs. By utilizing compelling case book and popular press books, students may actually refer to them after the class is over. While the 10th edition has been updated, it has been incumbent on the professor to continually update material. Updated material should allow for the continual learning process for both

student and professor. The commitment to updated material does require a tremendous commitment to the course. However, part of the success of “Marketing Mistakes” has been this continual updating of material. On course evaluations and in personal communication with students and alumni the presenting of timely material has been referenced as contributing significantly to the learning outcomes. Many of the comments revolve around the fact that the timely information made interesting cases that much more interesting. MBA students have always appreciated the effort required to continually update cases.

Another aspect of the course content has been the building of mini-cases for the final, individual writing project assigned in the class. These cases have been developed following the Hartley model of utilizing interesting companies from a variety of industries, incorporating a historical perspective and including the people making decisions. The final writing assignment for spring, 2009 included the Gap, Dell, Sony, Saturn and Kodak. Over the years cases have been developed for Starbucks, Motorola, Xerox, Ford, Apple, Chrysler, KFC and Amazon among others. Updating cases and developing mini cases for this course has allowed the professor to utilize current examples for other marketing course in addition to the MBA elective.

4. **Collect products.** The ability to showcase the products analyzed in the cases has been a critical factor in keeping students engaged in the material. For example, when discussing the New Coke case, it has been essential to actually have a can of New Coke available. Clearly, over the years fewer and fewer MBA students remember New Coke. The actual can of New Coke has been very powerful in making the case more interesting. “Show and tell” items have always worked well in marketing classes. Hartley has utilized a historical perspective in his writing of cases. This same approach has mirrored in class by showcasing failed and successful products mentioned in the cases or in the additional material provided in class. The collection of consumer products can be an expensive undertaking for a professor. Some of the items used in classes have actually been donated by current and former students and colleagues. However, purchasing products to utilize in class has become a passion. It has become a vital part of the appeal of the class to students. Students appreciate and recognize the value of the collection of products.

5. **Incorporate video clips whenever possible.** Over the many years of teaching this class, various video materials have been utilized to make the people in the cases come alive. Many times students have never seen the CEOs and others involved in the decision making portrayed within the cases. Visual images have obviously become much more important in engaging students in recent years. Students are often intrigued to see clips from the 1980s to the present. There are many sites available for company information and video. However, many times it has been the historical images that interest the student the most and generate the liveliest discussion. For example, seeing Jim Cantelupo, CEO of McDonalds, discussing his turnaround plan before his untimely death, was very impactful for students. It has been time consuming to find and compile video images; however, it has added tremendous value to the discussion of issues.
6. **Incorporate guest speakers.** One of the vital ingredients in building a successful elective class has been incorporating applicable guest speakers. Whenever possible it has been useful to add another voice to the class. The experience that marketing professionals share in class with the MBA students has proven invaluable. The professionals who are willing to their openly discuss both mistakes and successes has been illuminating to students. The speakers must be carefully chosen so that value is added, rather than simply taking up class time. Students are aware when professors are utilizing speakers to enhance the learning outcomes versus simply not being prepared for class and turning over class time to speakers. Speakers utilized range from local entrepreneurs and business people to corporate executives representing the companies discussed in Hartley's casebook that reside in the area. Care has always been taken in showcasing speakers from both public and private companies of different sizes in various industries. The students have always commented that the guest speakers have been their favorite part of the class. They appreciate the efforts made to secure the speakers. Cultivating relationships with capable marketing professionals has always been incumbent on faculty. However, contacting these professionals and coordinating schedules for class visits on the weekends has been a very time consuming activity.
7. **Organize the class material to utilize each session to the utmost.** This has required the orchestration of case discussion, in-class projects and guest speakers. The professor must become a skilled facilitator in order to enhance and manage the class discussions. It took three different semesters to make the course the success it has become today. Organization of the class management system, (Angel in this situation) prior to the start of the semester has been imperative to success. Every element of the class from the syllabus, to the participation and case analysis rubrics, to recommended websites have always been available before the end of fall semester as the class starts in January. All assignments also have to be posted so eager students can start with the reading. This has become critical as case analyses are due the first weekend of class.
8. **Build useful in-class team projects that encourage active involvement from all students.** Many of these exercises have revolved around current scenarios based on the cases analyzed or new companies that are in the currently discussed in various media sources. Projects vary depending on the information utilized and the topic of discussion for the class session. The typical timeframe utilized has been in the 15 minute range so students focus on the topic and remain engaged in the activity.
9. **Engage, respect and appreciate the MBA students enrolled in the class.** Remember that four hours on a Friday night can be difficult for students. The greatest complement from students has been to hear that the class time flew by quickly. Many students have obvious concerns about the intensive timeframe. Engaging students with interesting material and enthusiastic delivery has been very effective for the instructor. Facilitating discussion has been a key to ensuring everyone's voice is heard. The nature of the material helps discussion immensely. One of the most interesting Hartley cases is Harley Davidson. In a typical class half of the students have been passionate Harley lovers, while the other half views Harley motorcycles as passé. As a skilled facilitator a professor can ensure that the discussion does not merely revolve around emotion, but actual marketing strategy. Rubrics for every element of class have been developed and posted on the class management website, so students understand the expectations of active participation.

One way to show respect for students has been to actually learn their name the first night of class and use it. Obvious respect for students has been developed by learning names quickly. It also has been crucial since class participation has been required and evaluated every class session. Participation grades with feedback that have been posted with hours after each class session also show respect for the students. Students understand the level of commitment required for various participation grades.

Another method to show respect and appreciation has been to grade and return the cases analyses for each weekend session within forty eight hours after the cases have been submitted. Each student analyzes four cases per weekend session. This has been the most challenging of all the self imposed success elements that have evolved over the years. Grading and posting feedback has been critical in ensuring that students have time to reflect on the learning process. It also should allow students the ability to alter their current level of commitment, if necessary. This practice has been respected by students. Students have always commented positively in class and on the course evaluations about the time commitment required to grade all the case in such a timely manner.

10. **Accept student allies and their support.** Most MBA students have been and continue to be very vocal about their class experiences. The overwhelming support and buzz for this class has been humbling. Former students “sell” the class better than MBA support staff could ever do. Many of the guest speakers utilized in class have been former students that were excited to give back to the program and institution.

11. **Work hard, be enthusiastic and have fun as the professor.** This class has become my favorite class to teach and it shows. While it has been grueling to orchestrate an eight hour session, it has also been very rewarding. Students have always commented positively about the effective learning that has been created in these supportive, intensive class sessions.

SUMMARY

There is no single way to develop new courses. The recommendations given in this paper are made after a thirty year reflection of teaching MBA classes. Building “Marketing Mistakes” into a successful MBA elective by using interesting content has been rewarding professionally and personally. In an institution that values student learning, building successful courses is important professionally. A positive reputation for attracting MBA students is always valuable. On the personal side it has been humbling to be involved with terrific MBA students. The real value of the class has been engaging students in a unique manner and having them learn marketing strategy in the process. One of the personal rewards has been winning the institutions’ highest teaching award and being recognized as the professor of the year. No one could have predicted the success of this class in 1983. It has far exceeded all expectations. What is truly amazing is that the class has an almost cult-like following. Many alumni stay in contact for years and comment on the latest updates about the companies they analyzed. Current and former students send company updates and bring in products they believe will be useful for the next class. To that end “Marketing Mistakes” has been the most successful course ever developed in the Marketing department for the MBA program.

References Available on Request