

## UNLOCKING THE POTENTIAL OF MARKETING ELECTIVE COURSES

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### ABSTRACT

While electives can enrich the Marketing curriculum in many ways, they can also fall well short of their potential. This article will look at ways an industry-related elective course can boost both the learning experience and the teaching experience using as an example an elective course that proved especially effective.

The course used as an example incorporates findings of course-related research. It uses experiential activities to increase student learning (Hamer 2000) and build skills (Peterson 1996). Written communication and presentation skills are emphasized with multiple projects that also include development of PowerPoint presentations, all of which are graded to enhance the learning experience (Arora and Stoner 1992; Smart, Kelley, and Conant 1999). Research suggests that students learn effectively from successful professionals (Katzenstein et al. 1994), and guest speakers were included in select fields.

The example course was on the topic of Tourism Marketing. This article will closely examine the reasons this course proved to be successful in order to build a model to help both the author and others duplicate this success.

### STUDENT ENTHUSIASM FOR SUBJECT

Why was Tourism Marketing a subject that kept students interested and invigorated when an earlier elective on Multi-Channel Marketing, also developed by the author, proved ho-hum? Obviously one topic is associated with fun and adventure while the other subject looks good for you, the curriculum equivalent of oatmeal. Most students notice a lively subject, but fewer grasp what a Multi-Channel Marketing course is, let alone how they might benefit from it.

For success an industry-related elective course needs students to register and walk in the door with the expectation of an interesting, even fun class. This might be seen as pandering to students, but it is not. Rather it is part of creating an environment conducive to a deeper level of learning. Using this model, it is

desirable to find topics that have appeal to young adults; for example, Sports Marketing, Muscle-Powered Recreation Marketing, and Music Marketing.

### INSTRUCTOR ENTHUSIASM AND SUBJECT KNOWLEDGE

Suppose that the Marketing Department has decided to inaugurate a new elective on Marketing Popular Music and had asked this author to develop the course. This is not a good idea; the author has not listened to popular music since the young Elvis decades ago. He would find himself reaching for ear-plugs during student presentations. Popular music is not a subject the author has any enthusiasm for, despite its logical appeal to students. The subject of tourism marketing, on the other hand, has a mutual enthusiasm shared with the students. Finding the best fit between prospective elective courses and the knowledge and enthusiasms of faculty then is a factor in developing successful electives. The intersections of faculty and student interests, hobbies, and avocations is an ideal starting point.

Enthusiasm only goes so far, however. In the case of the Tourism Marketing course, the author also has interest and knowledge through a fair amount and variety of personal travel experience, as well as several years experience of maintaining a top-rated web site on travel planning. The site is designed to help tourists interested in visiting Churchill, Manitoba, a small town on the Hudson Bay in Canada known as the Polar Bear Capitol of the World. Churchill is the most popular destination for eco-tourists who want to see polar bears. The site's upkeep has involved years of corresponding with prospective tourists and with those in Churchill who meet tourist needs.

### A SUBJECT THAT LENDS ITSELF TO DISCUSSING MARKETING CONCEPTS

Obviously not every popular subject will be well suited to development into a course. A good subject will be broad enough to lend itself to discussion of many applications of core marketing concepts. The structure of the course should introduce core concepts and help students see how the concepts

are applied in the industry. The subject should also lend itself to class projects that give students practical experience using the core concepts themselves. Ideally, the subject would also be important to the economy.

Tourism proved to be a good topic in this regard because it has significant national, regional, and local impact. In many parts of the nation, including the area in which the author teaches, the hospitality industry is a major factor in total economic activity. Nationally the hospitality industry generates over \$163 billion in payroll income and more than 7.3 million jobs (TIA, 2006). The industry also generates billions from foreign travelers, introducing an international aspect to a Tourism Marketing course. Other possible industry-related elective course subjects should be evaluated as to whether they lend themselves to teaching Marketing concepts and have significant economic implications.

### **A SUBJECT WITH A VARIETY OF RESOURCES AVAILABLE**

Another consideration is whether appropriate and adequate resources are available for a potential subject. Resources are abundant in the field of tourism. Readily available resources are both comprehensive and varied. They include a wide choice of texts, guest speakers from various segments of the industry, video resources, television programs dealing with travel (even a channel dedicated solely to travel), books, travel guides, and industry literature.

#### **Texts**

There are two types of texts that may be available when teaching on a subject concerning a specific industry, although both types won't be available for every industry. Some texts have a marketing function style of organization and are organized in a similar way to a marketing principles book. The primary difference is that all of the examples relate to some aspect of the specific industry. An example of a tourism marketing text that fits this model is *Hospitality and Travel Marketing* by Alastair Morrison. The chapter organization in this text follows a familiar (to marketing professors) 4-Ps presentation.

The other type of text has an industry function style of organization. Such texts are organized according to the functional areas of the specific industry. The examples within chapters are of the ways in which different segments of the industry apply marketing concepts. On the subject of tourism, these texts feature chapters organized by topics on industry

functions such as transportation, accommodations, food and beverage, attractions, and destinations. An example of a tourism text that fits this model is *Tourism: The Business of Travel* by Roy Cook, Caura Yale, and Joseph Marqua.

Whether organized by marketing concept or industry function, these texts each have advantages and disadvantages. Texts organized from a marketing standpoint are familiar to students who readily recognize the format, which is itself both an advantage and a challenge. On the one hand students can use the book as a review of basic marketing concepts comfortably applied to a specific topic. On the other hand students may, and in my experience often do, see this type of text as repetitious of material to which they've already been exposed. Such a negative reaction can short-circuit their excitement with a new course and limit their ability to get full benefit from the text.

Industry function texts focus student attention on various segments of the industry rather than on a particular area of marketing. The reality of this style of text is that virtually all aspects of marketing are applied in each chapter because each segment of the industry has applications for all areas of marketing. Some students, however, may be distracted by the approach and miss the marketing aspects of these less conventional texts unless the instructor is aware of the issue and makes a point of teaching towards the marketing content.

#### **Guest Speakers**

Each community has its own unique mix of potential speakers in various industries. In a major urban business center, for instance, financial services marketing courses would have access to many speakers from all segments of that industry. In the Midwest, courses on agricultural marketing would have similar access. To the extent that the hospitality industry is an important part of a community, as it is in the author's case, guest speakers are readily available. Indeed, many appear to be eager to share their enthusiasm for their work with students.

Speakers are generally able to address not only specific aspects of the hospitality industry but also various parts of the marketing mix and marketing strategy. For example, tourism bureau speakers, who are often charged with promotion of conference, convention, and tourism business in a specific geographic area can share their marketing strategies for reaching various segments of the travel market.

Travel agencies can provide professionals who are knowledgeable beyond mere trip planning. They can give interesting perspectives on how the industry is changing as it is impacted by external factors in the environment that are beyond their control such as the Internet, terrorism, fuel costs, etc.

Managers of convention and conference centers, hotels, and motels add yet another perspective because each manager deals with a different target market. Many of them have experience with a full range of marketing challenges relating to their market segment and have developed comprehensive and well-developed marketing strategies. In addition, speakers are available to address aspects of marketing such as chains and franchises.

### **Video Resources**

Videos are available featuring many industries. Some of these are prepared for public television, others as documentaries on network TV. In the tourism marketing course videos were particularly successful in both holding interest and serving as illustrations of marketing concepts in action. One of these dealt with a major national bicycle event that annually attracts almost ten thousand participants for a week-long bicycle festival and generates millions of dollars for the communities it passes through. The other successful video was obtained from the Disney organization and targeted senior citizens with the concept of taking their grandchildren to one of the Disney properties. Discussing the market segmentation obvious in this video and the appeals that were made to the segment generated good discussion of how Disney used various appeals to reach seniors. Students watched each video with a viewing guide that focused their attention on important marketing aspects of the video (Hutchens 2005).

### **Television Resources**

Television provides numerous resources and, whether live or taped, has programs pertaining to many industries. In the case of the travel industry, two popular programs on public television that can be used to illustrate various aspects of tourism and hospitality are *Rick Steves' Europe* and *Smart Travels--Europe with Rudy Maxa*. While the programming is targeted at individuals who like to travel, discussing the various aspects of marketing involved can lead to significant discussion since all aspects of marketing are represented. There is also a major travel network, the Travel Channel, with good resources. Internet resources are easily integrated

with topics mentioned in programming to help tie it all together.

### **Literature and Magazine Resources**

Books, magazines, and various types of literature are available on most industries. Travel guide books and travel magazines present various destinations and types of travel. Literature about tours, resorts, and cruise lines offer colorful and stimulating material for discussion of how firms in the industry identify market segments, target them with promotional material, and position their offerings as having the benefits the segment seeks.

### **Resource Summary**

Ample use of outside resources brings courses alive for both students and instructors. In the author's case, teaching a Tourism Marketing course at a university in a city that is a tourist destination itself and is located near even larger tourist destinations, made finding guest speakers relatively easy. Many of the other resources used would be available anywhere.

## **COURSE STRUCTURE: CORE CONCEPTS AND PROCESS**

### **Core Concepts**

Marketing electives can play a number of roles in a marketing curriculum and can take a number of forms. They can focus on a single part of the marketing mix (Petty, 2000) or they can be adapted based on the needs of the external business environment (Young and Murphy, 2003). Their impact can be on students, faculty, and the curriculum itself. For all of these, a common benefit is freshness. Applying marketing concepts in a specialized area can stimulate student enthusiasm for marketing and enrich a faculty member's experiences in course development and teaching. The concepts focused on in the tourism marketing course were:

- Adoption cycle
- Consumer buying behavior
- Environmental considerations
- Ethical concerns
- External environment
- Globalization
- Market segmentation
- Marketing concept
- Marketing mix
- Marketing research
- Positioning
- Product life cycle
- Target marketing

## Process

The process model of this course was to first elicit a highly motivated student involvement with an approachable assignment and then build on student success with a focus on applying core concepts in written, oral, and PowerPoint formats. The model allowed students some degree of choice and flexibility while taking them to depth in applying core concepts. Especially important was giving students a choice of projects.

The initial assignment in the tourism marketing course was to have students plan various types of vacations and trips they might like to take. Then the students took their work further by presenting their travel plans in full detail to the class with an emphasis on evaluating the *marketing* of the firms that target the particular travel types or destinations they researched. After these assignments it was quite helpful to have students plan trips and events for customers who were of a target market *different* from that of the student. This assignment forced them to do research from the perspective of a professional serving a customer. Another approach used was to impose time and/or budget constraints that would focus on different aspects of the travel market. In all cases students were required to present and critique the marketing efforts of the hospitality firms they used in meeting the assignment.

Marketing educators realize that developing communications skills is important (Smart, Kelley, and Conant 1999), and this course placed significant emphasis on both developing both written and oral skills. PowerPoint presentations required developing visual presentation skills as well. It was satisfying to the author to see students applying core concepts with improving communication skills. Previously, for many students, the concepts had been little more than loosely understood buzz words when used outside the format of multiple choice exams.

## SUMMARY

Using the experience of developing and teaching a particularly successful industry-related elective course as a model, key features in planning elective courses can be identified. Prerequisites to success are student enthusiasm for the subject, and instructor enthusiasm and knowledge of the subject. In order to insure that the course is not only popular but also substantive, additional features are important. These features are a subject that is well suited to discussing marketing concepts and a subject for which a wide variety of enrichment resources are available. To fulfill its initial promise an elective needs to provide

assignments that involve flexibility and student choice, as well as a clear focus on core marketing concepts.

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