

LESSONS LEARNED IN AN INTERCOLLEGIATE MARKETING COMPETITION

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an intercollegiate marketing competition, sponsored by General Motors, in which the authors participated. The organization, process, and problems encountered are presented along with suggestions for future competitive efforts.

Background of the Competition

The GM Intercollegiate Marketing Competition was initiated in 1976 to encourage creative student thought about the principles of marketing and advertising and to provide realistic experience to students of those disciplines.

In January, 1986, our university was invited by General Motors Corporation to participate in the General Motors Intercollegiate Marketing Program. Student teams from eight leading universities, operating under a \$6 million budget ceiling, were challenged to develop, based on current market and socio-economic conditions, a six-month marketing and advertising campaign to market, sell and to "build excitement" for the 1986 Pontiac Sunbird.

Project Outline

Student entries were to be presented in treatise form (not to exceed 50 pages) accompanied by an executive summary. In addition, each team would make a one-hour presentation to a General Motors judging team during Spring campus visits.

The participants for the 1986 competition were:

Baruch College - The City University of
New York
University of Massachusetts
Duke University
Florida State University
Fordham University
Howard University
University of Oregon
California State University, Los Angeles

The following is a representation of the tasks to be performed in the course of the project:

Part I. Research

o The target market for the project had to be outlined and justified.

o The design of research had to be described. A description of its use to test the identification and explanation of target market attitudes and behavior was also necessary.

o Marketing and advertising objectives and the marketing mix were to be outlined.

o The media selected had to be described and justified in terms of the advertising/marketing objectives.

o Budgetary compliance had to be demonstrated.

Part II. Creative Exercise and Execution

o It was important to state and support creative strategy and rationale, including a statement about theme consistency throughout the campaign.

o Creative suggestions had to be submitted including:

At least one print layout,
An ad for the school's student newspaper,
At least one TV storyboard,
At least one radio script.

o Additional submissions may include such items as:

Outdoor billboard layout,
Dealer and other merchandising materials.

The extent to which art was finished was left to the discretion of individual teams. Judging was to be based upon plans and execution of ideas -- not proficiency in art.

Part III. On-Campus Presentation

o An up-to-one-hour presentation of the team's findings in Parts I and II had to be presented in a logical and persuasive manner to the on-campus judging panel.

o Material presented then had to be defended during a Q & A session with on-campus judging panel.

Scoresheets, which were to be used by the judges during both the on-campus and treatise evaluation, were distributed to all participants. Student teams were urged to organize their oral and written presentations with reference to these scoresheets.

Even though the authors made sure that this requirement was totally fulfilled by the various student groups, it turned out (sadly) that the on-campus judges did not even have scoresheets with them during the on-campus presentation and were completely unfamiliar with the scoring weights of the various judging criteria.

Project Calendar

Official Program Initiation -- January, 1986

GM On-Campus Visits -- April 14-25, 1986

Treatise and Executive Report Due -- April 23, 1986

The Organization

The organization guidelines, given by General Motors, were as follows:

- 1) The program may be administered through a regularly scheduled class, a special projects class, a marketing or advertising club or as an extracurricular activity.
- 2) The ideal team size is about 25 students.
- 3) It is permissible to have a number of teams within the college or university compete against one another. Only one entry from each school may be submitted to General Motors.
- 4) Although the teams may be composed of undergraduate or graduate students, or a combination of both, in the past, teams composed solely of undergraduates have been at a disadvantage in the final judging. (This final admonition from GM can be partially confirmed by the authors.)

The Process

The choice was to build a single team organized as an extracurricular activity. The university where the authors teach, operates on a quarter system, so in January, at the beginning of the Winter quarter, a team of marketing students was recruited. In February, participation from graphic arts and broadcasting students was solicited. This task was accomplished through the use of flyers and class

presentations. The team consisted entirely of undergraduate students. This is customary at our university where the majority of masters students are working professionals who attend classes only in the evening and whose extracurricular activities are very limited.

One of the authors, a full-time graduate student was detailed to be the coordinator of the team. It was decided that the team be structured as an ad hoc "advertising firm."

The intent of this organization was to perform market research, formulate conclusions based on the research, develop an advertising campaign based on those conclusions and then to produce that advertising campaign for presentation to the judging team from General Motors.

The Communications Group was staffed by marketing students. Their task was to keep the entire team informed of each group's activities, progress, intentions, update the program bulletin board centrally located in the business school and to keep and distribute the minutes of the team meetings which were conducted every Saturday for the duration of the project.

The Treatise Group was also staffed by marketing students. Its purpose was to design, conduct and analyze market research and to write the treatise for the project.

The Presentation Group was comprised of marketing, graphic arts and broadcasting students. This group was to design and present the presentation of the research and advertising campaign produced for the competition.

The Audio-Visual & Graphic Arts Group was staffed with graphic arts and broadcasting students. Their assignment was the production of the advertising campaign components: magazine, newspaper and billboard layouts, a 60-second radio commercial and a 30-second video commercial.

Group leaders were chosen for each group and they reported directly to the program coordinator who acted as liaison between the team and the faculty advisor.

Competition Activities

January. During the first month of the competition the coordinator worked in conjunction with a member of the economics faculty and the treatise group to design and conduct the primary market research. A class of statistics students then input the raw data for

computer analysis. Initiated as a time-saving step, the decision to integrate the input of data into the curriculum for this statistics class actually caused much delay and some loss of data. Participation had been offered on a volunteer basis, as a substitute for another class project, in hopes of garnering student enthusiasm and thereby, quality work. However, student adherence to instruction was very spotty.

The limitations of the undergraduate team became apparent during this period. There were no members of the group with sufficient knowledge of statistics to contribute to the analysis effort. All analysis was performed by the authors.

Results of the analysis and their possible significance were disseminated and discussed at the Saturday team meeting.

Secondary research was conducted during this same time period by all marketing students on the team as well as by selected marketing classes not directly involved in the competition. This research consisted mostly of on-campus library work though some research was carried out in-person at the dealer level. Again, the undergraduate team encountered great difficulty in discerning items which were appropriate for the topic at hand and those which were of little value.

February. Conclusions based upon the research data started being formulated. At this point the coordinator approached professors in the broadcasting and graphic arts departments to enlist their students for participation in the competition.

In cooperation with a graphic arts professor, the authors, supervised an independent study section of undergraduate art students whose assignment would be to design and produce the newspaper, magazine, dealership pamphlet and billboard layouts for the oral presentation in April. It was agreed that the coordinator would address an advanced graphics class and try to recruit as many students as were interested. Twelve graphic arts students joined the team. Three later dropped and the remaining nine completed all assigned work.

The artwork was the most outstanding feature of the presentation and the conduct of the art students was professional and dedicated.

Six undergraduate broadcasting students were chosen to participate in an independent study section to design, cast and produce a 30-second video

commercial and a 60-second radio commercial for presentation to the GM judges in April.

The broadcasting students were thoroughly professional and showed great resourcefulness and imagination in the completion of their contribution to the competition effort.

March. In this month the treatise group began work on the treatise. Fifty-percent of the team grade in the competition was to be based on the quality of the treatise. General Motors had provided an outline for this 50-page document.

Successive attempts at compiling the research based on this outline failed. The undergraduate marketing team lacked the skills needed to transform separate pieces of research, secondary and primary, into a unified written interpretation. With the exception of the media plan, it became evident that the authors would need to write the treatise if it were to be completed by the program deadline.

Planning of the presentation was also begun during this time. Half of the competition points available were based on the quality of the presentation. It indeed transpired that our presentation received the highest rating. During Saturday meetings the presentation team members were urged to envision the arrival of the GM judging team; then the aim was to make the influence of the team felt for the duration of the judges' visit. Evidence of preparation and pre-planning were to be pervasive.

April. As stated, all sections of the project were completed in a timely fashion. The hour-long presentation in April was a multi-media event attended by approximately 100 faculty, students and administrators. The judging team was impressed by the amount of preparation evidenced and the quality of the art and video work presented.

The treatise and accompanying executive summary were shipped in time for the April 23rd deadline.

Major Problems

Several problems existed with the portion of the team composed of marketing students.

1) The method used to recruit students in the business school was the issuance of a blanket invitation to participate. It was anticipated that this would yield a participating population whose individual abilities were normally distributed. As it turned out, the distribution was more skewed to the right.

2) The independent study format of the project was too unrestricted for many students. They lacked self-direction and may have performed better in a more structured atmosphere.

3) Constructive criticism was not graciously received by the marketing students (as compared to art and broadcasting students). Much time was spent during group discussions with defensive posturing and hurt feelings.

4) Approximately half of the business students were members of the marketing fraternity which has been plagued by much infighting and power struggle. These clashes were carried over into the Saturday morning meetings causing them to be less productive than they might have been.

Other Problems

The only problem encountered with the broadcasting students was a direct result of not involving them at an earlier stage of the competition. The time pressure under which they were forced to operate caused anxiety which could have been avoided if the broadcasting students had started their involvement sooner.

General Motors was derelict on two counts: 1) in not providing background information which they had pledged during the introductory phase of the competition; and, 2) in delivering the automobile for research purposes one month after the promised delivery date. This caused delays in primary research. The Pontiac district manager was supposed to be our main company liaison. In fact, he never returned telephone calls and only once provided promised materials.

Recommendations

The authors believe that most of the problems involving the business students could have been avoided if recruitment methods had been different. The following are recommendations for future marketing competition efforts.

1) Publicity and student screening for team membership should begin as soon as a commitment to the competition has been made. In our case this means that student screening would have started at the beginning of December instead of the beginning of January.

Instructors should approach their best students to discuss the project requirements and recruit those students who show interest. Selectivity is absolutely necessary.

2) All interested students would then meet with the faculty advisor for the project and class meetings scheduled, previous to the actual start of the competition.

3) Graduate students should be actively recruited since it is assumed that their capabilities in the field of research would be superior to those of undergraduates.

4) Although 25 was recommended as the ideal team size by General Motors, we believe a larger team size would precipitate a more finished product. Five qualified graduate students, 10 undergraduates (as the team's "arms and legs"), 10 qualified art students and seven broadcasting students would have been optimal, in our opinion.

5) Although cooperation from the schools of fine arts and communication was generously and enthusiastically given, it should have been sought at an earlier stage and at a higher level. When the decision to undertake an interdepartmental project is being made, the chairs of the different departments involved should convene and discuss the level and structure of departmental involvement.

6) The interdepartmental approach is strongly recommended. Although proficiency in art and broadcasting was not supposed to be part of the judging criteria, the judges admitted to being very moved by the quality of the advertising executions presented. They made comments which suggested that, owing to the high caliber of artist execution, their regard for our presentation was greatly enhanced.

7) A team teaching approach, drawing upon the expertise of various marketing faculty members in such areas as research and advertising, might enhance the project end-product and reduce the stress experienced by a single faculty advisor and a single team coordinator.

Experience gained in this event was ranked by every participant as very valuable. Art and broadcasting students augmented their portfolios not only with very commercial work but with certificates of involvement from General Motors. Marketing students (who also received certificates) gained not only realistic experience in marketing but an interesting life experience as well.