

SOCIAL MEDIA: OBTAINING “REAL WORLD” MARKETING EXPERIENCE IN THE CLASSROOM?

Stephen Quinn, Marketing Consultant; Stephendanielquinn@gmail.com

**Joel Herche, Eberhardt School of Business, University of the Pacific,
Stockton, CA 95211, jherche@pacific.edu**

ABSTRACT

Marketing educators are seeking new and innovative ways to integrate experiential learning in their classrooms. Administrators are also feeling the pressure to show stakeholders that their graduates have faced challenges that bear a resemblance to the type their new employees will face as they begin their marketing careers. The experiential learning movement, in addition to presenting a fresh and exciting way to introduce students to the traditional marketing material, has been addressing these themes for decades.

Ben Franklin once said that “Experience is a dear teacher, but fools will learn at no other.” His perspective reflects an appreciation of the high cost of mistakes. In marketing, mistakes are inevitable as one learns the complexities of understanding competitors, consumers and channel intermediaries. The philosophy of experiential learning could be summarized as seeking to maximize learning while minimizing the costs of errors. Supervised internships, simulations, role playing, case analyses and the like seek to provide a realistic venue for students to try out their ideas in a limited-risk environment. When the inevitable mistakes are made, the costs are usually minimal to non-existent.

Early experiential learning theories were created by Lewin, Dewey and Piaget (Kolb 1984). They conceived of experiential learning as a process that involved experiencing, observing and evaluating. Lewin had the most straightforward method that describes learning as a cyclical process. He believed that immediate personal experience was the focal point for learning, giving life, texture and subjective personal meaning to abstract concepts and at the same time providing a concrete, publicly-shared reference point for testing the implications and validity of ideas created during the learning process.

The original purpose of the social networks was to “enable users to articulate and make visible their

social networks (Boyd and Ellison, 2008, 211)”. Within these social network sites users could participate in networking. This was done by communicating through one’s extended network and finding “latent ties” to create new relationships. But this is not the main focus of these network sites with people “primarily communicating with people who are already a part of their extended network” (Boyd and Ellison, 2008, p. 211). Social networks have evolved from their initial purposes back when they were created in the late 90s.

Clearly, social networks carry potential for instructors seeking to incorporate an experiential component in their syllabi. The question of their ultimate effectiveness rests on the external validity of the experience: do students obtain realistic interactions with the marketing environment? Do competitors act and react in a manner consistent with the “real world?” Are customers as fickle, channel intermediaries as stubborn, promotion as expensive, margins as narrow or the legal aspects as hostile to business? While such questions can easily comprise a future research agenda, their evaluation must be conducted recognizing the relative advantages over the experiential learning alternatives. The actors in the marketing environment in social networks may not behave realistically, but because they are made up of actual people deciding how to use their actual resources, they offer clear advantages over those of simulations, case analyses, role playing and even internships.

When students experience an actual cost from their mistakes, something beyond a poor grade in a marketing class, only then will the true impact of experience begin to yield its fruit. Social networking offers marketing educators an important venue to provide a potentially expensive and/or rewarding, readily accessible exercise. Although Ben Franklin said those who will only learn from experience were fools, even he recognized the didactic power of experience.