

# TEACHING CUSTOMER SERVICE USING A CLIENT-SPONSORED PROJECT ON SERVICE BLUEPRINTING

Mary C. Martin and Michael J. Martin, Fort Hays State University  
Theresa Billiot, Cameron University

Client-sponsored projects (CSPs) can be an important pedagogical tool for marketing professors at institutions of higher education. While they appear to be commonly used in marketing capstone courses, client-sponsored projects can certainly be integrated throughout the marketing curriculum as they offer several benefits. This article describes the use of a client-sponsored project in a Customer Service and Relationship Management undergraduate marketing course. Specifically, the project involved students participating in a return and repair process for power tools, developing service blueprints of the return and repair process, and making customer service recommendations for a specific power tool manufacturer, the American Tool Company (a pseudonym used to protect the identity of the company). The use of client-sponsored projects as marketing pedagogy is discussed first. Then, a brief overview of the power tool industry is provided, as well as a brief review of the literature on service quality and service blueprinting. Finally, based on the authors' experiences, the project results are summarized and recommendations on how professors can successfully integrate client-sponsored projects into the marketing curriculum are made.

## **Client-Sponsored Projects as a Pedagogical Tool in Marketing Courses**

Marketing is both a science and an art, is a widely diverse field, and exists in a dynamic environment given significant and rapid advances in technology. As such, marketing professors are challenged to constantly innovate and seek means by which to improve their teaching of marketing. "Experiential learning can be a powerful pedagogy for teaching marketing's broad body of concepts, principles, and analytics by internalizing theory through guided practice" (Young, 2002, p. 43). Young (2002) describes the "hands-on" (experience/experimentation activities) and "minds-on" (deliberate reflection and conceptualization) components of experiential learning and advocates that both need to be included in the marketing classroom. In describing the use of experiential learning in the consumer behavior course, Morgan and McCabe (2012, p. 142) wrote, "the best way to learn about consumer behavior is to put it into action." This philosophy could certainly apply to any marketing course, including customer service (or "services marketing," as it is oftentimes called).

A form of experiential learning, Strauss (2011, p. 315) defines client-sponsored projects as “a type of live cases that involve students working with local businesses or nonprofits to solve a current challenge.” As an example, Strauss (2011) describes the use of several CSPs in a marketing capstone course. Using the format of the television show *The Apprentice*, the class incorporates four to five client-sponsored challenges. Student teams compete against each other and are judged by clients as to their ability to solve real marketing problems.

### **Service Quality and Service Blueprinting**

Quality, defined broadly as “superiority or excellence” (Zeithaml, 1988, p. 3) is an important consideration in customer satisfaction (Behara, Fontenot, & Gresham, 1995). More specifically, quality can be either objective or subjective (Zeithaml, 1988), as well as product- or service-specific (Foster, 2010). As a result, the concept of quality has been defined in many different ways (Zeithaml, 1988), and often defining quality entails a list of quality *dimensions* (e.g., Garvin, 1984, 1987; Zeithaml et al., 1990). Regardless of how quality is defined, company leaders need to identify how the company’s customers define quality (Parasuraman et al., 1988).

One of the ways to improve customers’ perception of quality is to improve the process of delivery of the service (Zeithaml et al., 1990). This is important because “each encounter between the customer and the firm provides an opportunity to judge quality and increase loyalty” (Behara et al., 2002, p. 607). Further, Bitner (1990, p. 69) stated that, “in many cases those discrete encounters *are* the service from the customer’s point of view.” For service-based organizations, perceptions of service quality and satisfaction are key performance metrics (Morrison Coulthard, 2004). “Most companies agree that customer service quality provided to their target customers affects global business performance to some degree and becomes one of the crucial strategies in a company” (Hung, Huang, & Chen, 2003, pp. 79-80).

Many mechanisms exist for company leaders to use to improve the internal or back office processes relevant to the service experience of customers. Mattson (1994) suggested that the first step towards the improvement of service quality was the modeling of the service process, and the modeling process might involve the use of *service blueprints*. Service blueprints are “pictures or maps of services processes that permit the people involved in designing, providing, managing, and using the service to better understand and deal with them objectively” (Kumar, Strandlund, & Thomas, 2008, p. 978). More specifically, a service blueprint shows each step in a service process in the sequence in which they appear (Zeithaml et al., 1990). *Above-the-line*

service processes, which are visible to the customer, and their recommended timeframes for completion are depicted, along with fail-points, “processes in the service system where deficiencies are most likely to occur” (Zeithaml et al., 1990, p. 159).

### **The Class Project**

Over two years, two Customer Service and Relationship Management classes (with approximately 45 marketing majors) participated in the power tool return and repair project (the class is offered in the spring only). In one class, students returned 40 tools, representing five different power tool manufacturers, including circular saws, reciprocating saws, and drills that are used by building contractors (representing the business-to-business market in the industry). The following spring semester, students again participated in the tool return/repair process, documenting their service experience with an American Tool Company authorized service center. Instead of using five different power tool manufacturers and the authorized service centers, the project used only the authorized service centers of the American Tool Company. The tools were supplied by the American Tool Company. One of the authors taught the class and supervised the participation in the class project.

The return merchandise process over a period of approximately 2 months was documented. Each student was provided 1-2 power tools that needed to be repaired. The students returned the tool to an authorized service center and documented in detail the process that occurs until the tool is received back in proper working order. The instructor supervised the project and provided data collection materials, but once the students began the tool return/repair process, the students participated in and documented the processes on their own. The students’ service experiences were translated into a service blueprint for the American Tool Company.

### **Discussion and Recommendations**

The power tool return/repair project allows the students to go through real-world experiences of business-to-business customer service. Returning a tool for repair gives them an opportunity to examine the process as well as how the process affects or impacts the customer. One advantage is that it gives the student an opportunity to understand both the process and the emotional aspects of customer service.

The project was designed according to the learning objectives for the course. One of the objectives of the course is to understand customer turnoffs and how to move customers from being indifferent to being satisfied. Part of the project includes filling out an experience ranking,

which presents the students with an opportunity to document their experience using several key indicators for service excellence. The spreadsheet contains ratings of areas such as attitude, ease of doing business, and ability to provide a solution. The student is also able to make extensive comments about their experience and how it made them feel. Students are able to see and experience where fail-points might occur in the process and have a basis for improving the process to improve customer satisfaction.

One of the most relevant aspects of the project is the service blueprint that is created to describe the process of return/repair. This blueprint is based on the original work of Shostack (1986) where the *backstage* and *on stage* activities of the service provider are identified and mapped into a diagram that allows the company to view what some refer to as *points of pain* (also known as *fail-points*) so that the process can be improved for future customers. According to Gremler, et al. (2000), constructing service blueprints is very challenging and shows the critical nature of the relationship between human resources, marketing, and operations in delivering superior customer service.

While the project has been successful at meeting learning objectives for the course and giving students a real-world experience, project enhancements could improve student learning. It would be beneficial for both the client and the students for the students to revise and submit an additional service blueprint as another deliverable for the project, one that is more sophisticated in describing the service experience and incorporates their recommendations on how to improve the service process. In addition, it would be beneficial for students to incorporate more of the “minds-on” phases of deliberate reflection and conceptualization that Young (2002) describes as important to the experiential learning experience. Finally, another recommendation is to discover ways to incorporate additional client-sponsored projects into the marketing curriculum.

References available upon request