

MARKETING MANAGEMENT PROJECTS: ASSESSMENT INSTRUMENTS OR DEVELOPMENTAL BUILDING BLOCKS FOR TOMORROW'S LEADERS

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Abstract

Corporate employers continue to complain about the written and oral communication skills of our university graduates from business schools across the nation, even going so far as to hire liberal arts majors with few or no business courses. Would a greater emphasis regarding the application of theory in a final project create both a more confident and competent graduate? Further, with various accrediting institutions emphasizing outcomes assessment, would a different emphasis in teaching a capstone Marketing Management course yield an improved final project with greater emphasis on acquiring the communication skills necessary to succeed? A module approach has been shown to build an exemplary final quality project that benefits all stakeholders; student, professor, employer, university and the community at large.

INTRODUCTION

A variety of factors near the millenium have converged to demand a more competent and confident graduate in both undergraduate and graduate business programs. Indeed:

- students are reluctant (even resistant) to traditional educational pedagogy that requires the student to acquire knowledge not in the required text nor covered in-depth in class,
- faculty are faced with a wave of students who want their business classes to be highly relevant and have little patience for theory unless they can immediately grasp the practical application of it,
- accrediting agencies are requiring that universities address outcome assessments, (AACSB 1994)
- legislative bodies are demanding accountability for monetary resources allocated, and
- recruiters want graduates that can come aboard and immediately begin to contribute to the firm's success(AACSB 1996).

In light of these demands, a different approach to the capstone class in Strategic Marketing Management was developed and has yielded a number of benefits beyond that of the traditional project. The purpose of this paper is to share the structure and results of this class with other marketing educators as well as address the concerns of the aforementioned stakeholders.

DESIGN OF THE PLAN

In order to provide students with an opportunity to develop the skills needed to successfully navigate corporate America, a three pronged approach was developed. The approach utilizing a "living" case, student demonstrations using power point presentations (if technology at university is adequate, otherwise acetates will do) presenting the highlights of a contemporary book and a final strategic marketing plan on an existing corporation. The results to date have been significant and demonstrably better than the traditional class approaches emphasizing either a multiple case orientation or objective tests. The results will be discussed at length in the results section of this paper.

Objectives of the Course

There are multiple objectives in achieving mastery of the elements of a strategic marketing management course. Among them to:

- guide students in the development of executive presentation skills as well as encouraging critical thinking skills in a major project,
- emphasize oral and written skill development
- expose students to contemporary business books or articles in the field of marketing through individual reading assignments and vicarious learning, and
- promote learning approaches requiring analysis, synthesis and application.

A "Living Case"

Undergraduate (large class). In order to illustrate the major concepts in the text, a "living case" is selected for analysis. The case might be a corporate choice, such as "Apple" but much more success has been had using the home university as a "living case." For example, a SWOT analysis is performed by student teams on the home university. As a precursor to that assignment, students are required to identify customers (not just themselves) but faculty, alumni, business community, community at large, recruiters and potential employers, etc. It is often an eye-opening experience for the class. Consultant teams compete for the "best" and most complete analysis and one team is selected to act as a board of directors questioning the consulting teams. Then, the faculty member poses

decision-making questions to the board members and they must determine if they have been able to acquire both the quality and quantity of information that would result in a "good" decision. Finally, the board of directors must "hire" a consulting team and justify their choice to the class.

This approach is especially valuable in the first few weeks of class when students need to begin to "think like consultants" instead of a student in search of an "A." The team that is designated the "board of directors" rotates each session in order for all class members to have had the experience of judging proposals as well as preparing proposals for presentation. Since there is but one case, "the university;" teams begin to compete for "best proposal." Thus, information as well as the ability to present persuasive and compelling arguments for a particular course of action creates a lively level of participation and interaction among the class members. Since the case is "live" and there is not a "right" answer, participants begin to understand the "risks" of certain strategies, how uncertainties affect decision making and the opportunity costs inherent in following Strategy "A" vs. Strategy "B."

Graduate (small seminar class). Students are required to bring a one-page analysis of the main topic (customers, competitors, SWOT analysis for example) with enough copies for all members of class. In a class of 12-20, students are divided into teams of four or five and must select the best analysis (their own analysis are removed from consideration in their own group so that they have no vested interest in the outcome). The "best" analysis of each group is examined as a whole and students discover that a variety of good analyses exist. In participating in this exercise, students get a "peek at the competition" and realize that although critical thinking skills are essential, there is much to be said for format, attractive "executive" presentation and compelling data obtained by secondary research. Although the first round is full of uncertainty, students get in the "spirit of discovery" and friendly competition the second time around as the quality of the analysis vastly improves.

The "winners" of the best analysis are treated as consultants and are required to stand in front of the class and must field questions from the group that selected their paper as the best. Each member of the team that selected the consultant is required to ask at least one question of the "consultant." The spontaneity, "the hotseat" is both a challenge and an honor. Further, those students asking questions not only enjoyed the "power" of asking but also realized the importance of "experiencing a logical thought

process in forming a question..." for the consultant on the hotseat.

Student Presentations

Students are required to do two presentations; text and contemporary book or article. Whether the text presentation of material is a team or individual presentation is highly dependent upon the number of students in the class. Undergraduates often present as a team, graduate students as a two member team or individually. While graduate students gravitate to power point presentations and undergraduate students to acetates, much depends upon the available technology of campus facilities and/or portable units, which might be owned by the graduate students or loaned to them by their corporate employers. At any rate, there is considerable vicarious learning that occurs as the best laid plans can go awry...and often do. But in a kind and constructive learning atmosphere the errors are handled with lightness and humor as students struggle in an environment where the "error" is not a career disaster.

Contemporary business book presentations must be approved by the professor, be related to some component in the subject matter of strategic marketing management, and provide additional knowledge to the individual as well as his/her classmates. Graduate student classes are often small enough that individual presentations add a rich base of applied knowledge to class and provide a forum for discussion of contemporary business issues. Undergraduate students in a small forum might likewise present a contemporary book, but given the size of most undergraduate classes, a contemporary article from an approved list of periodicals enhances the educational experience without being too overwhelming for the undergraduate presenter or the audience in the time allotted.

Strategic Marketing Plan-Modules

Far too many times students will turn in a strategic marketing plan that needs additional work, sometimes minor revisions, sometimes major. At this juncture, the semester is over; the students are racing around the halls asking if you are through grading yet. Sound familiar? It was with this challenge in mind that a module approach was implemented with a commitment of increasing the quality of a plan within the usual course structure.

Project Selection. The students are allowed to select the company for which they will complete a strategic marketing plan. Graduate students often select the company for which they are currently working. The employers often welcome the project and as they might

be supporting the student in grad school, have more than a passing interest in the results. On occasion, firms have deemed their company's information to be "proprietary" and are reluctant to share internal data outside the executive ranks. If the student senses that the information is considered "too sensitive" an alternative is considered. At this juncture, I often suggest the student select a firm they might like to work for in the future. This maintains the "realism" of the project and provides for a basis of strong commitment on the part of the student. Undergraduates will often select the company they would like to work for as part of developing an overall portfolio to share with the recruiters of that firm. With such care in selecting, the projects are not "just for class" and are taken quite seriously. A far better "quality" project results from the selection as well as greater interest in application of strategic theory.

Team or Solo Structure. Undergraduates are often working in teams of four and are simultaneously working through the expected "team" challenges. Graduate students in a small seminar class often work individually due to full time job constraints. Although in a large class teams of two can be used very effectively.

Works-in-Progress (Partial Drafts) of Final Project. At the end of the first third of class, one-third of the course material has been covered and the students are required to turn in the first third of their papers. After the first round of papers are assessed and the teams meet with the faculty member for feedback, one might expect that the material covered in the second module and integrated into the second draft would show vast improvements over the first third. Ideally, it does. Pragmatically, there tends to be three categories of papers that emerge. One group is "outstanding;" so very good that the professor looks forward to a project that will be of value to the firm. A second group is still struggling but making advances in the right direction, as expected. Finally, a very few papers will still need considerable guidance and direction. More seriously flawed papers in this last group might still lack vital information on a major section. At this juncture, it is important that the professor underscore that his/her feedback is seriously compromised by the lack of information in the paper and that this is the last opportunity to receive individual guidance and direction. At some point, it is essential that this point be made, otherwise, the students with the poorest papers will all want feedback within the same 24 hours prior to the project deadline. If individual feedback can not be provide for all members of the class than unfair discrimination results. The

professor must be prepared to answer all questions in class and refuse individual consultations with select members of the class after the deadline has been publicly announced. Otherwise, charges of favoritism might be asserted and a promising pedagogy becomes an ordeal for all parties concerned.

Assessment of Projects. It is essential that both of these papers accrue points towards the final project. Generally, the first and second "third" of the paper receive 25% each of the component of the final grade. For instance, if the paper is worth 160 points total, the first third will receive 40 points, the second third 40 points and the "complete" final paper will be worth 80 points.

RESULTS

As a capstone class for undergraduates, this course provides as opportunity for students to polish their presentation skills, further develop critical thinking skills, communicate in an extemporaneous mode by fielding questions from the "board of directors" provide a strategic analysis and propose recommendations in the role of consultant. For graduates, all of the aforementioned benefits result as well as a project, which has the potential to advance their career.

But most importantly perhaps is the appreciation of the application of marketing strategy to "real life" corporate/academe problems. Eventually, the final project is assessed as a part of the final grade in the class. But the intermediate work-in-progress drafts as well as the individualized feedback combines to produce a much higher quality paper and students who both understand and can articulate the application of strategic marketing theory to their peers as well as current and/or prospective employers. The class project becomes a tool to develop their skills, not just another assessment instrument or hoop they have to jump through.

LIMITATIONS

This course structure is best suited to a small, graduate seminar class. Although it can be modified in a number of ways, the major constraint is the additional time spent in preparing not only written comments but the individual "coaching" necessary in order for the student to address deficiencies in the project. The advantage of a "live case" as a major component of this class is perhaps the greatest benefit of using this type of pedagogy. Students generally have such a good time with it that there are really very few drawbacks.

In a large class that has been divided into teams, it is important to keep the competition between the teams "light" so that learning is enhanced. Generally, since each team will rotate one time to the "board of directors," comments, though direct, are overwhelming constructive and kind. Setting the tone is critically important, but not a difficult task. In a graduate class (small, seminar) the students act as a board of directors with individual members on the hotseat presenting their perspectives of competitors, customers, etc. The greatest benefit of using the "live case" is the unpredictability, the uncertainty, and the many different perspectives that will arise that must be addressed.

The different components of this class require the professor to be very well organized in order to stay on track. But in a three-hour night class (graduate), the change of pace is most welcome and helps the class to stay alert, focused, and involved in a participatory way. The first time through requires confidence that the "live case" will work. After that, it gets easier each time.

BENEFITS TO STAKEHOLDERS

Students

Perhaps the benefits to the students can best be captured by sharing a selection of their comments from a debriefing instrument.

"I liked knowing what I was doing wrong. Most of the time with other professors, one does an assignment and then get a grade. The paper has a letter grade, but provides no feedback so that one can know what was done right ..and what things needed to be worked on...."

"The feedback provided by have three separate modules for the Marketing Plan was very beneficial for me. The first module provided the necessary input to show whether I was actually doing the right thing. The second module not only reinforced the fact that I was 'on track' but it helped in keeping a focus on the project. The required material is quite overwhelming in content and application. The three-part presentation made the project more doable for me and helped to keep the information fresh in mind when working on the next part."

"This is my first MBA class and my undergraduate degree was obtained in 1984. I needed the individual assessment/input to make sure I was headed in the right direction."

"It is very beneficial for me to receive feedback...and guidance....I feel my final paper will be something that I can be proud of and can share with others. The bottom line is I learned."

"After doing the first 2/3 of the project I have found that it is a really challenging task....It really helped me to broaden my power of thinking about a corporation. I believe that after completing this marketing plan, it will help me a lot in my professional life."

"This was an enjoyable break from the typical case analysis. This had much more meaning to me personally because I had the opportunity to research, filter and digest a topic which was of interest to me. So many times a dry, drab case is assigned, it is worked on, and then forgotten. This will be a learning experience that I can reflect on and actually put to use for my real job outside of the school setting. I appreciate the opportunity to receive the feedback on each module. I like having the chance—early and midway to change direction or regroup if necessary."

Faculty

The "live case" approach provides an opportunity for students to begin thinking like decision makers early on and asking pertinent questions of one another as to the quality of information that is being offered by the teams. This is a very important foundation for the written project to follow as the focus is on providing information for a "quality" decision, not a game of "just throw everything into the paper...the thicker, the better" attitude. Although the module approach does incrementally increase the grading load, the students who most need guidance and direction are provided feedback in a timely manner so that the end result is a far better quality paper.

But perhaps one of the best outcomes is an understanding of the importance of "revision;" a concept that appears quite foreign to many students accustomed to turning in a paper and never having to go back and reconstruct where needed. I know of no field that does not utilize some form of revision, reconstruction, etc. Yet, out students often leave the university with the impression that revision and collaboration are somehow "outmoded" concepts that do not apply to their work; if they think about the concepts at all.

University

The President of the University visited class and fielded questions regarding the mission, goals, and strategic plan with the graduate students. He was invited by the students about three weeks into the class at a point where students were becoming more knowledgeable about customers, competitors, and had completed a SWOT analysis. The question and answer session provided ample opportunity to discover weak linkages in their analysis and consider new perspectives as well as new information. Many indicated that they were "very impressed" that the President would take the time to visit with the class. (If the President is not predisposed to interactions with students, other administrators could be invited, who would be knowledgeable) This opportunity for administrators to engage in a meaningful dialogue with informed students increases communication while advancing the goals of the class.

Community

Some of the projects selected were non-profit community organizations that have a very real need for a strategic marketing plan but neither the funds nor expertise on board to fulfill the need. The student's project is most welcome and needed. As the projects are selected by the students there is generally a strong motivation for completing an excellent project that will enhance the viability or effectiveness of the community organization. Over time, this can build goodwill within the community and is an extension of the university's involvement with the community.

Recruiters

Firms are requiring that students bring applicable skills and knowledge into the workplace. For those students interviewing, a project on their future employer denotes more than a passing interest or "just looking for a good paycheck." It differentiates them in a very positive manner. But perhaps even more, by the time the project has been completed, the student has attained a more realistic perspective of the firm's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats that will enable him/her to assess the viability of a good employment match.

COMMENTS

This class structure has been extremely well received by the graduate students. The integration of a "live case" has resulted in a much more participative interaction than in the traditional case course, while retaining the importance of the development of critical decision making skills. Mostly, it sets the stage for the project to follow. Further, the final quality of the projects has been significantly enhanced. Although the module approach to the project is time consuming, students begin to view the project as an interesting challenge and less as a punitive device or problem to be surmounted. Especially notable is the interest and commitment the students take in a project that their manager has shown an interest in as well. This extends to those students who have selected a non-profit community organization, often desperate for marketing help and heavily dependent upon volunteers in the community. The outcome of the project is important, not simply a trial to be endured. The attitude is one where "real learning" becomes important once more and being the "guide" on the path of knowledge is fun, not contentious.

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