

USING WEB-BASED CHAT IN MARKETING COURSES

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the use of a web chat tool to afford marketing students the opportunity to learn from one another's consumer experiences. Students' reactions to the web chat tool are noted. Pedagogical strengths and weaknesses of web chat and potential future applications are discussed.

WEB CHAT AS A LEARNING TOOL

As the number of new technologies available for use by educators has exploded over the past few years, students are becoming more and more accustomed to a technologically-rich environment. No longer can educators simply ignore the new technological teaching tools. Students are demanding more engagement with faculty and fellow students than was possible prior to the advent of today's computer and communication technologies (Ueltschy 2001).

Beyond e-mail, two other web-based communication devices are now beginning to be employed more frequently in marketing and other education. These tools, commonly known as bulletin boards and chat, allow communication among students and teachers outside of the classroom. The distinction between the two tools is that with bulletin boards discussion takes place at various times at the convenience of the communicators, i.e., asynchronous communication, while with chat communication takes place in real time, i.e., synchronous communication. Dietz-Uhler and Bishop-Clark (2001) found that both of these types of internet communication can enhance students' learning as well as the quality of later face-to-face discussion.

While various articles and research papers have addressed the benefits and challenges of educational uses of web chat and bulletin boards (e.g., Eastman and Swift 2002; Ingram, Hathorn, and Evans 2000, Jeong 1996) and the use of bulletin boards in marketing education (Krentler and Williams 2001), little has been published with regard to the use of web chat in marketing education. This paper describes an exploratory attempt to use web chat as a component of a marketing principles class.

MARKETING PRINCIPLES CHAT ASSIGNMENT

Having students reflect on purchase experiences of their own can help students to understand the

consumer decision process. In this regard, students might be assigned to reflect on a particular experience and tie it into the consumer decision process and influences on the consumer decision process by writing a paper about the experience. However, instructive as this kind of assignment may be, it does not, in and of itself, allow students to learn by being exposed to other students' experiences. Further, class discussions following these kinds of papers often fail to bring out a large number of students' experiences. If a good number of students do share their experiences, the danger is that too much class time could become devoted to a discussion with a lot of redundancy.

Perhaps a better solution is to allow students to become more involved in discussing their experiences by using web-based chat. By using chat, all students can participate in comparing consumer experiences without taking a great deal of class time. Many students who might be self-conscious in expressing themselves orally before the entire class can, instead, express themselves in writing, not face-to-face, with a small group of peers. Further, if a transcript of the chat is available to the professor, the professor can evaluate the effort that each student has exerted in the discussion process and also discover ways in which the specifics of the assignment can be modified to enhance learning.

SPECIFICS OF THE CHAT ASSIGNMENT

The specific chat assignment reported on in this paper took place using WebCT chat. WebCT is one of several software packages designed to make it easier for professors to make course materials available to students on line. The WebCT package includes e-mail, chat, and bulletin board functions that the professor can choose to use or not use. The chat function makes available four "chat rooms." Any student in the class can choose to log into any of the chat rooms at any time. "Conversations" that take place in each of the four WebCT chat rooms are only available to the students logged into the chat room at the time. The students do not have available to them a transcript of their chat; however, the professor does have access to a transcript.

Students were assigned to chat groups consisting of three to four students. Equal numbers of chat groups were assigned to each of the available chat rooms. Students were encouraged to coordinate with the

other groups in their chat rooms to avoid the problem of two groups in the same room at the same time. Also, students were also informed that the professor would have access to the chat transcript and that part of each student's grade for the assignment would be based on how well he used the chat to learn as much as he could about his other chat group members' experiences.

In response to students who wondered why they could not simply chat face to face, the students were given the following reasons for using computer chat for the assignment. First, some students who are less vocal or extraverted might feel less inhibited in a chat room situation and more prone to participate fully. Second, interactive web discussion rooms are becoming more commonly used as marketing research and promotional devices. This would be a chance for them to experience the strengths and weaknesses web chat first hand. Third, if the students were to communicate face-to-face, the professor would not be able to evaluate each student's participation in the process, whereas with the chat transcript, the professor is able to do so.

The WebCT chat function was fairly easy for the students to use. They required little instruction in using the tool, even though most had never participated in chat before. Because students could link to WebCT from the school's website, they were able to participate in the chat assignment from where ever they had an internet connection.

STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES WITH THE CHAT ASSIGNMENT

Students' experiences with the chat assignment were positive overall. This was manifest in three ways. First, the transcripts of the chats themselves showed that students were, overall, enjoying and engaged in the experience. Second, a class discussion and one-on-one meetings with students afterwards were largely positive regarding the chat assignment. Third, students were asked to fill out a questionnaire following the experience addressing what they thought about the experience, and most expressed that the experience was worthwhile.

Many comments included in the chat transcripts indicated that the students enjoyed discussing one another's purchases. For example, in one chat session that consisted of one male and two females, all were addressing furniture purchases. Toward the end of the discussion, the male student commented, "I enjoyed understanding your purchases. . . . I think looking at it from another view helps ourselves understand more."

Some exchanges showed the students having fun with the assignment. For example, three male students began what was to become a riotous one-and-a-half-hour session with one student commenting, "This is kinda weird being in a chat room where I'm not pretending to be a teenage girl." While some of what ensued was a bit course, the chat group was able to remain fairly focused and complete a good discussion of the purchase topic. Later one of these students confided that while he had expected the chat experience to be unpleasant, it turned out, instead, to be a lot of fun.

This thought, that the experience was more enjoyable than anticipated was echoed in class discussions about the project. While students expressed a few frustrations about the limitations of web chat, they felt that the assignment was worthwhile. It gave them an opportunity to acquaint themselves with the chat tool first hand.

Following the assignment, students also filled out a nine-question questionnaire, developed by the professor, about their experience with chat. More negative reactions surfaced in the written survey than had in the class discussion. Nevertheless, those were not entirely enthused with the assignment were, for the most part, counterbalanced by those who were quite positive. When asked whether the assignment should be repeated in future marketing courses, thirteen of twenty-one students, or about 62%, felt that it should be.

Some of the positive comments are as follows:

- "It was fun – I thought it would be lame, but it wasn't. Besides, if you've got the capabilities, use them."
- "It helps to learn and understand different personalities and their experiences so you can compare and contrast."
- "The more students practice, the more useful it can be. I think all students should become familiar with the tool."
- "It is a different learning tool. Easy to get together."
- "It was entertaining, educational, and something different."
- "I like meeting with my group face-to-face, but I think it's easier to do chat. We could do it in different places (work, home, school, etc.), which was nice, since different people's responsibilities required them to be different places, e.g. at home tending your kid."

STUDENT ISSUES WITH THE CHAT ASSIGNMENT

While the chat assignment was educational and enjoyable for most of the students, some did not appreciate the experience. Most of the students who did not see much value in the exercise expressed the idea that it was just "busy work" and not as useful or convenient as face-to-face discussion. For example, one student commented, "It seemed more like busy work and an excuse to get us on WebCT than anything." Another noted, "I didn't really learn anything new. It was just another thing to do." One wrote, "it seems ridiculous to require it when talking face to face is much easier and more convenient."

These students rightly observed the advantages of face-to-face discussion. As mentioned above, face-to-face discussion proceeds more rapidly and in a more orderly fashion. As one student commented, "Although the chat tool is a neat concept, I don't think it's that useful. I think it would have been faster and more efficient to get together and talk face to face." Further, another student commented that "it is too hard to maintain conversational flow and for everyone to respond to one question, because you move from topic to topic so quickly." And, finally, one student mentioned the importance of body language to conversation. In truth, some miscommunications took place in the chat discussions, largely due to the absence of visual and aural cues to meaning.

Complaints were also lodged against the specified time length of the chat assignment. Although no specific time requirement had been set for the chat, a suggestion was made that students might want to carve out an hour or so of their time so that they would not feel rushed in their discussions and not have to cut the discussions short mid-stream. In response to the assumed time requirement, one student commented, "The important stuff was done in 15 minutes, the rest was B.S." Another group also felt obligated in going forward to spend the full amount of time even though they felt that they had completed the necessary discussion. Presumably, though, with a bit more professor coaching and some increased effort and creativity on the part of the students, it is difficult to imagine that three students couldn't spend at least an hour chatting about the nuances of their purchase decisions.

IDEAS FOR IMPROVING A CHAT ASSIGNMENT

The assignment described here was a first attempt to introduce marketing principles students to chat. Clearly, many possibilities exist for improving the assignment. Some suggestions are as follows:

1. *Comparing and contrasting face-to-face and web chat.* Some students pointed out that it's easier to talk face-to-face than it is using web chat. If the web chat were to follow a face-to-face discussion, students could not be tempted to say "we should have done this face-to-face, rather than using web chat." The assignment would be pitched as an opportunity to discover differences.
2. *More instruction on questions and questioning methodologies.* Many students got less out of the assignment than they might have, because they asked only superficial questions to learn the barest of facts surrounding their classmates' purchases. Students need to be coached and prompted in how they might get a little under the surface. Perhaps an interview form could be developed as a class that students could use as written or modify for their use. This could tie in well with a discussion of qualitative research methods.
3. *More responsibility for what was learned through doing the exercise.* The assignment described here was largely a description of the student's own experience with a paragraph or, at most, two at the end comparing the student's own experience with that of the others in his chat group. If students had been expected to glean more information from their fellows and do some depth reporting on someone else's experience, they might have worked harder to find the information that they needed for the expanded assignment. Also, it might be useful to provide each student with a transcript of his chat session so that he could refer back to it in making his report.
4. *Share the best chat moments with the class.* The chat transcripts could be used as a teaching tool for the whole class. If, for example a student was in a group that did not quite gel, she could see how well the process can work and what can be learned when the process goes well. This might also help the student to introspect with regard to what might have gone wrong in her session.
5. *More ground rules for an orderly discussion.* The web chat was frustrating for some students because, in essence, three or four people are "talking" at a time and the time it takes for each to type in questions and responses creates a lag. Thus, for example, one person asks a question, and before that question can be answered, someone else pops in with the response to a previous question. One suggestion to deal with the

confusion here is that perhaps one member of a three or larger person group could be a bit of a discussion leader. Also, the process works better if people are addressed largely one at a time. In other words, the group might focus first on person A and her experience, then on person B and his experience. Alternately, the group might look at each group member's experience at each step of the consumer decision process. In other words, the group might focus first on person A's problem recognition, then person B's problem recognition, and so forth.

Questions may still overlap one another, but the fact that just one person is answering questions at any point in time should help.

6. *Keep the groups to three, or even two.* The more people that are in the chat group, the more chaotic things can become in terms of overlapping questions and answers. This problem is compounded by the fact that people have very different typing speeds. While it is nice to hear a number of different perspectives, the reading of chat transcripts leads to the perception that the fewer the group members, the smoother the chat. Perhaps dyads are even better than groups.

SUMMARY AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Web chat offers a number of benefits to the marketing educator and student. First, web chat is a new way of communicating that students should become familiar with. Chat has been used by marketers for both research and promotion purposes. Second, web chat offers a potential opportunity to the less vocal student to feel more involved in discussions. Third, depending on how it is configured and made available to faculty, web chat may be able to leave behind a record of student chat discussions. This can be valuable in getting to know students better and evaluating their understanding and learning. The transcript could also be used for studying the process of student chat discussions, as well as any substantive topic that the students have been assigned to discuss.

One of the most important challenges to implementing a web chat assignment is students' concern with why this form of discussion is being used rather than the simpler face-to-face discussion. An important part of developing a web chat assignment is anticipating this concern, developing the assignment such that chat does have advantages, and clearly articulating the reasons for the use of web chat to the students. The simple fact of having a written record of what has been

discussed is an important selling point for the assignment. This point will be even more compelling to the students if they are given access to the transcript of their own chat sessions and held responsible for extracting something from the transcripts. In fact, memories for what has actually transpired in the chat session, absent being able to refer to a transcript, seem to be somewhat fleeting. It would be difficult to take notes while engaging in web chat.

Two future directions seem particularly important for the web chat tool. First, the assignments for which the tool is used must be constantly refined with the objective of making them more engaging and educational for students. Second, more possible uses and applications for the tool should be explored. A natural fit for the tool seems to be the marketing research class. For example, marketing research students might be able to interview one another with regard to a marketing research-related topic using the chat function. They could then be given access to the chat transcripts both for understanding of how their interviewing techniques could be honed and for analysis of the topic. At any rate, the imperative is to find useful ways to use this powerful tool, rather than simply ignoring it or using it merely because it is there.

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