

CLASSROOM/COMMUNITY INTERFACE: STUDENT RESEARCH HAS AN IMPACT ON COMMUNITY

Ruth Leshar Taylor, Southwest Texas State University

ABSTRACT

Classroom/community interfaces are growing in popularity. This paper focuses on a situation where student research had a powerful positive impact on community growth and development. A Chamber of Commerce sponsored student research project served as a basis for this research. Methodology used, details of student involvement, benefits from student, community and professor viewpoints are presented.

INTRODUCTION

Adding relevancy and realism to the classroom is a pedagogical issue that every classroom teacher faces. As is understood, classroom concepts applied from an experiential standpoint increases retention and understanding. Application, through client-sponsored student research projects, works well conceptually, but in reality is very demanding on both student and teacher. Historically, many professors have attempted community/student research projects in an attempt to provide experiential learning. Santos and Vincent (1989) found that client-sponsored research projects (CSP 's) are more popular at accredited than at non-accredited AACSB business schools. Their findings indicate a growing popularity of client-sponsored projects at both types of schools. Experiential learning experiences are not controversial, but professors do debate whether benefits offset the time and effort requirements.

Today marketing graduates are increasingly encountering potential employers who are demanding prior work experience as a minimum requirement for entry-level positions. Thus, it has become much more important for colleges and universities to provide the student with as much realistic experiential learning as possible. Experiential learning, as a routine part of individual course requirements, is a means of providing students with some form of "prior" experience. Santos and Vincent (1989) found that 84% of the AACSB accredited business schools and 54% of the non-AACSB accredited business schools use client-sponsored projects in marketing courses. Lambert and Sterling (1988) published an article on the advantages and disadvantages of industry-sponsored university research projects. This increasing use of client-sponsored projects emphasizes

the need for marketing educators to communicate results of student/community projects.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of this study was twofold: 1) to specifically describe student involvement in a student/community marketing research project, and 2) to communicate benefits of this project from student, community, and professor viewpoints. This description will be useful to professors of marketing research in stimulating ideas for a classroom/community interface. This description also benefits community leaders in several ways: 1) by creating an awareness for the community to communicate research needs to professors, and 2) by illustrating how they can cooperate in planning and sponsoring feasible and realistic studies that would benefit both community and student.

DESCRIPTION OF STUDENT MARKETING RESEARCH PROJECT

Research Class

This classroom/community student research project was designed and arranged by a spring semester Marketing Research class consisting of 18 male and female students. This class was offered at a non-AACSB accredited university under the direction of the marketing professor. The research university was located in a small southwestern town which was in close proximity to an urban metropolitan area of approximately 275,000 residents. The research town included approximately 15,000 citizens (4797 occupied households within city limits and the extra-territorial jurisdiction - ETJ). The research town was experiencing tremendous retail leakage in almost all product categories other than groceries. The research town lacked an industrial base and was short of cultural and shopping alternatives. The local university, of approximately 1100 students, historically did not interface with the community to a great extent.

Research Design

The community marketing research student project was coordinated with the local Chamber of Commerce to study shopping attitudes and behaviors of the local residents in attempt to determine factors influencing the retail leakage. The Chamber of Commerce financed the cost of postage needed for the survey portion of the project. The university financed the printing and paper needs. The methodology used is given below.

1. A focus group consisting of 10 respondents was arranged. Members from the business, financial, religious, and university communities were included. Representatives of citizens at large also participated. The professor served as the moderator and all students served as focus group recorders. The purpose of the focus group was to gain exploratory insight that would serve as input for survey questionnaire design.

2. From focus group response, a questionnaire of 116 questions was formulated. These questions were designed to: 1) gather demographic data, 2) survey attitudes toward various types of shopping, 3) survey perceived product availability, and 4) determine satisfactions with present community offerings. This questionnaire was pre-tested by the 18 students who interviewed three community members each. The questionnaire was adjusted as needed and student interview training was completed using role play.

3. The United States Block Census data for the research city was used as the population. The city was divided into nine approximately equal sections within city limits and three sections in the ETJ west of the city. ETJ areas, East, North and South, were sparsely populated. One section of the city was almost entirely college students living in dormitories. These particular sections were not surveyed as they were either sparsely populated or they did not involve typical households. Ten per cent of the households in each section were surveyed controlling for a minimum of 30 completed surveys for each section. The participating blocks within the 8 city and 3 ETJ sections were randomly selected using block statistics from the 1980 Census of the United States Population. Random quota sampling was used to select 10% of the blocks from each section. The first household in each selected block was randomly drawn. After this first household was selected, systematic quota sampling was used. Two attempts were made to contact not-at-homes. If no contact was made, these households were termed non-respondents and

were eliminated from the study. In this situation, students were instructed to choose the household that was located to the right side of the non-respondent. Each selected household was personally interviewed by students using a written survey questionnaire to ensure uniformity of interview. If a personal interview was not allowed, a postage-paid return mail envelope was provided.

Three hundred and thirty questionnaires were distributed. A response of 249 households representing 443 total adults was obtained. Each student completed 13 interviews.

Data Analysis and Reporting

The intent of this study was descriptive in nature. Descriptive analysis provided the necessary details to give an overview of the respondents' interests, opinions and demographic characteristics. No cause and effort type relationships or analyses were attempted. A report, including managerial recommendations, was given to the Chamber of Commerce in written bound form. A copy of the entire published report was placed on file at the university and public libraries. Completed copies were made available to the public for the cost of printing and out-going postage. The results were orally presented to the Downtown Business Association monthly meeting by the students.

Value of the Study

The value of this lifestyle student/community project was four-fold: (1) it served as a basis for historical trend analyses, (2) it documented town citizens' profile at a specific point in time, (3) it provided businesses a basis for developing effective marketing strategies, and (4) it provided sectional profiles useful as a guide to newcomers and other interested persons. The final published report included a general demographic profile, media, sports, hobby and food and dining preferences. Retail store and entertainment preferences were determined and reported. Support given to and satisfaction with local educational, medical and dental efforts, cultural events, politics, and retail businesses were ascertained and included. Citizens' desire for or against growth in specific types of retail businesses were surveyed, and included as a final report chapter.

RESULTS OF THE PROJECT

Student Viewpoint

This project was very detailed for an undergraduate marketing research project. Students overwhelmingly felt they learned a tremendous amount about research techniques and interviewing strangers. They did have some suggestions for future courses. They felt this project in addition to testing over the textbook was too much work for a three semester hour course. One suggestion was that Marketing Research should be a two semester class. Marketing Research I could be required for all marketing majors. Marketing Research II could be offered as an advanced business elective. This elective would be dedicated to the design, implementation and analysis of a community research project such as the one explained above. The students felt their favorite part of the entire project was the focus group. For many students this was the first one-on-one discussion interaction with groups of business people. Through the focus group, students became aware of community concerns they had previously never considered. Students seemed impressed that they, as a group, had written a 122 page professional research report. Students were encouraged to take a copy of this report with them to employment interviews. This project then could be used as an aid in their learning experience discussions.

Community Viewpoint

Perhaps the community gained the lion's share of this project. Results of this student/community project were in high demand. Community leaders and business people called daily for the final results printing date. The Chamber of Commerce used the survey results as a marketing tool to attract business and industry to the community. Copies on file at the libraries and the Chamber of Commerce were used by businessmen and investors in making business expansion and new ventures decisions.

Professor Viewpoint

In review of the design, implementation, analyses and reporting of this project, the professor deemed the project very worthwhile. The worth of the project was evident from both an experiential learning standpoint and from a community contribution standpoint. The project demanded very strict attention to detail, time management, and the bolstering of student morale.

Students had to be encouraged to concentrate on the long-term benefits of the project and not get bogged down with the amount of work it took to accomplish it. Students grew weary toward the end of the project. Their proofreading of the final report had to be monitored carefully. Unfortunately upcoming finals squeezed class discussion of results and benefits of the project.

Although the students were weary at the end of the semester, short-term and long-term benefits were abundant. Students immediately started using the printed report as an interview tool and as a guide for doing research projects in other educational courses. Students' former apprehension of regularly assigned "term projects" seemed to diminish. They proved far more capable than they previously considered themselves. From a professor viewpoint, the long-range results of this project are unmeasurable. Although the benefits are numerous, the students' suggestion of a two-semester marketing research course was wisely taken.

SUMMARY

As student marketing research projects are gaining in popularity at both AACSB and non-AACSB accredited business schools, professors need to share the results of student projects. Through shared methodology and results, marketing educators can gain insight into how other professors conduct student research projects. This insight can help reduce professor and student frustration in the early learning stages. Shared results also serve as idea generators for new or expanded research projects. This reported methodology, results, and insights are of benefit to marketing educators. Additional articles need to be written concerning design and conduct of student research projects at both AACSB and non-AACSB accredited schools. Long-range follow up studies need to be conducted. Follow up studies need to determine the usefulness of these client-sponsored studies to students in entry-level marketing positions.

A five-year follow up study to the reported project is planned. The follow-up study will measure the usefulness of student recommendations to the business community. Implemented student managerial recommendations will be measured for long-range effectiveness.

REFERENCES

Lambert, Douglas M. and Jay U. Sterling (1988), "Corporate-Sponsored Research: An Opportunity for Educators," Journal of Marketing Education, (Fall) 20-28.

Santos, Gilbert de los and Vern Vincent (1989), "Student Research Projects Are Gaining In Popularity," Special Issue on Marketing Research, Marketing News, 23 (January 5) 36.