

Windows on the World (WOW): Real Cases, Right Now!

Gary L. Karns, School of Business & Economics, Seattle Pacific University, 3307 Third Ave. W., Seattle, WA 98119, (206.281.2948; gkarns@spu.edu) and Dan Rogers, Modernmind, Inc.

ABSTRACT

This paper describes the use of a unique approach to teaching an introductory MBA marketing class. A practitioner-academic instructional partnership and contemporary, real-world cases were utilized to create an enhanced experiential learning opportunity.

Adding realism to marketing courses has been an important marketing education theme contributing to the development of "real-world" skills and increasing student involvement. Students desire the use of "real world" educational activities (Kelly, Conant and Smart, 1991; Clayson, 1992). Marketing plan projects, site-visits, guest speakers and cases have been used to add realism and involvement (Madden 1983; Dröge and Spreng 1996; Karns 1989; Frontczak and Rivale 1991).

The foundation-level introductory MBA course in marketing was team-taught by a faculty member and a marketing practitioner using contemporary, real-world cases (Windows on the World – "WOW Cases") to enhance realism (Stafford 1996). All of the cases were new situations based on the current consulting work of the practitioner instructor. The cases raised fundamental marketing issues (e.g. market size, creation of customer value, segmentation, brand positioning, product design, and promotion).

Wherever possible the cases reflected the actual manner and tone posed by the real executive in addition to the decision situation. At least one of the cases was a copy of an actual memo with handwritten marginal notes from the executive decision-maker as it was sent to a subordinate for analysis (with permission).

In addition to the realism created by the nature of the WOW cases themselves, the instructional team carried the realism further by having a panel of marketing executives (often the principal of the case) read and comment on the students' case analysis.

STUDENT RESPONSE

The WOW cases were seen as realistic, active, stimulating, applied, helpful, and qualitative. They were also seen as requiring much effort. In general they were seen as more effective than historical cases. T-tests showed that these ratings were

significantly different from the midpoints of the semantic differential scales. The cases were rated as moderately difficult and, interestingly, only somewhat concrete. This was probably due to the higher level of uncertainty and ambiguity associated with emergent decision situations where much relevant decision making information was not given within the case.

All aspects of the WOW case approach were seen as effective. The most effective aspect was that it helped students develop the ability to think like marketers. The cases were only moderately effective in developing personally relevant industry specific knowledge. T-tests showed that these ratings were each significantly different from the midpoints of the scales. Further, the dominant themes in the open-ended comments were that the WOW cases were very helpful. In students' minds this approach was successful in reaching the important objectives of developing the marketing thought process and developing the ability to apply knowledge and analyze marketing environments.

LESSONS LEARNED

Teaching the introductory MBA marketing course with a practitioner-academic team was an exciting opportunity for the students (and the participating faculty member).

Using such contemporary cases presupposes a ready source of marketing problems from a variety of product industries. Choosing how much information to reveal in the case itself is a significant pedagogical design decision. In "real-life," information is rarely a given. This choice will influence student perceptions of difficulty and their level of frustration due to ambiguity and uncertainty. Taking a "less-is-more" road probably is better suited to graduate than undergraduate students.

While team teaching presents its own challenges in providing timely feedback, using external reviewers exacerbated the problem. Even so, the external reviewers added a very meaningful component to the course.

REFERENCES ON REQUEST