

THE IMPORTANCE OF PROFESSIONAL OR 'SOFT' SKILLS IN MARKETING EDUCATION: THE DESIGN AND EVOLUTION OF A HIGH PERFORMANCE MARKETING SKILLS COURSE

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ABSTRACT

According to Kelly and Bridges (2004) and Porter and McKibbin (1988), a major criticism leveled at business schools by corporate recruiters is the failure to adequately prepare graduates for the 'real world' of business. While failing to reach a general consensus as to how 'soft' skills should be defined or which 'soft' skills are most salient to career success in marketing, these and a growing number of other studies nevertheless agree to the importance of 'soft' skills such as oral and written communication, teamwork, critical thinking, creativity, leadership, and managing diverse workplaces. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the impetus, history, design, and evolution of a professional skills course that was specifically and successfully created to address this concern in the marketing curriculum of a large, public university.

Initially, the course was designed to incorporate and integrate the following professional skills: creativity, critical thinking, negotiating, understanding different cultures, selling an idea/product/service, managing conflict, serving customers, team building, leadership, listening, providing and receiving feedback, and managing time and stress. Since its inception, the course has undergone several iterations and significant growing pains. The four, primary stages of evolution for this course can be defined as follows: the introduction stage, the ten topics stage, the adjustment stage, and the reassessment and integration stage. During the introduction stage, the course exhibited a very flexible, free-flow process in which students selected the topics of discussion. Utilizing the information from the introduction stage, the second stage identified and incorporated ten specific soft skills into the course content. During the adjustment stage, new topics deemed relevant for marketing managers were gradually introduced into the course to reflect a more 'real world' perspective. During the current reassessment and integration stage, the soft skills covered in the High Performance

Marketing Skills Course continue to undergo reassessment, integration, fine-tuning, and modification.

The High Performance Marketing Skills Course has resulted in considerable success via a process of trial and error coupled with continual refinement and adjustment. As the reassessment and integration stage continues, the authors anticipate the full-scale integration of all of the professional marketing skills originally proposed for this course. While additional challenges are expected, we are optimistic that the external validity of ongoing studies in management education in general, as well as continuing direct feedback from students and potential employers of marketing students will provide an enduring catalyst for change (Smart et. al 1999). Accordingly, this paper suggests important areas for future research to address employer perspectives, faculty perspectives, and student perspectives on a more comprehensive basis.

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