

**MARKETING ON THE INTERNET -
A PEDAGOGICAL EXERCISE**

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ABSTRACT

Businesses are increasingly beginning to market on the Internet. Academia needs to prepare its students to take on the responsibilities arising out of this change. This paper is an experiential account of such a course being offered at a major South-Eastern University. It also describes the contents of the course and the teaching method followed. Some student reactions to the course are also presented.

INTRODUCTION

We are living in turbulent times in which technology is the change agent. The Information wave that Alvin Toffler describes in his book "Third Wave" is here and the only certainty in this age is change. Change has implications for everybody including academicians. We in academia need to keep pace with the events around us so that students who graduate are ready to take on the newly emerging responsibilities in the corporate sector. This is the objective of the course "Marketing on the Internet."

The Internet or simply "The Net" has become a popular tool in the last two years. While a young adult may consider it a play tool, and a student may view it as a library resource, a marketing manager may want to use it either as a media or a channel of distribution or possibly both. There are a number of surveys that try to estimate the number of people on the net. One of the conservative estimates is 50 million (AdNet Creations 1996). This is too big a market for most marketers to ignore. The demographics of the consumers on the internet indicate that the average household income is \$59,000. Gvu's WWW User Survey (1996).

This is in spite of the fact that nearly 25% of those on the net are students who would have a substantially lower income. Hence the buying power of the consumers on the net is a factor difficult for marketers to ignore. Most large companies and many small businesses have established a presence on the net to tap this market. Hence it becomes important for business students who are seeking corporate jobs to understand and apply this new technology/medium.

The article is structured as follows: First, we describe the structure of the course "Marketing on the Internet" along with a brief description of the contents. In the next section the teaching approach for those contents is provided. In the concluding section we describe the profile of a particular class and the students reactions mid-way through the course.

STRUCTURE OF THE COURSE

This course is structured such that students understand the internet and its components from a marketer's perspective and learn how to use it to promote their company's products. The course is divided into two parts. The first focuses on components of the Internet and the uses they can be put to. The latter half stresses on the marketing aspects that the internet can be used for. In the first half of the course the students get the tools required to carry out the projects and the exercises in the second half of the course.

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Internet and its components

The focus during the first part of the course is to understand the historical background of the internet, the uses of its various components and the terminology's associated with it. A brief history of the internet is presented to the students so that they may appreciate its evolutionary process. The terminologies or the jargons used on the net are discussed so that they may become less of a mystery to most students. A substantial portion of time is spent in explaining each of the components of the internet and its uses. Following is a brief description of some of the components of the internet.

E-mail: It is the most basic function of the Internet. It is used to send messages/mails. It is the most widely used component of the net and has become one of the most common forms of intra-business and inter-business communications. One of the mail tools (Pine) is explained in full detail and concepts such as domain names, IP addresses and logon ids are explained in this section.

Telnet, FTP and Gopher: Some of the methods by which one can hook up to the company's server and transfer files from/to their PC are dealt with in this section. Some of the technical aspects are also explained so that the students are able to operate on different servers and not merely the one in the school.

Listserv and Usenet: These are two very popular and common means by which information is shared among people interested in a particular topic. There are close to a hundred listservs/ mailing lists which are linked to business topics and about 20 of these are related to marketing. Similarly there are a number of newsgroups which are devoted to the subject of

business and specifically to marketing. The students learn to subscribe and participate in both listservs and newsgroups and the dos and don'ts on public forums - a.k.a. "netiquette."

World Wide Web: This is possibly one of the prime reasons for the popularity of the Net. It provides a plethora of information and is easy to navigate through. In this section the students learn about different browsers and the different uses they can be put to, like "surfing on the net", sending mail, and reading news-groups. They are also exposed to the strategies adopted by the major companies marketing browsers.

Search Strategies: In this section the students are exposed to different facets of the various search engines and their characteristics. They start judging the capacity of these search engines and determine the best way to arrive at certain sites. Each of the search engines has a certain criteria for selecting sites. The students are exposed to these criteria and develop web pages that can attract the highest "hit rate."

Accessing the Net: Many students do not have access to the net other than the school system. However when they take up corporate positions they will be called upon to make a choice of the Internet provider for themselves and may be even for their company. Towards satisfying this need they are exposed to the criteria for selecting the access providers and how to rate them, and the pitfalls they should avoid.

Security, Privacy and Ethical Issues: These are issues that concern everybody on the net and hence the students are exposed to these issues. As a part of a company they may also have to learn the necessity to have firewalls in place to ensure the security of their corporate system.

Marketing Issues

The latter half of the course deals with commercial applications of the Internet. The students are made aware of the various surveys conducted on the Internet and their potential application in designing marketing strategies. Certain cases of companies which have gone through the “growing pains” of getting on-line are discussed. Advertising and Retailing related issues for companies are discussed and projects developed such that students start developing Internet strategies for hypothetical companies. During this part of the course the assignments and projects are designed such that the students have to make use of most of the features of the internet that they have been exposed to during the earlier part of the course.

Finally the students are taught how to create home pages so that they can implement the marketing strategies that they developed earlier in the class. Typically students create a home page for one of the departments or organizations associated with the school. Thus they are able to design and implement strategies using the tools they learned in the earlier part of the course.

Teaching approach

Since this is a course concerning high technology, an attempt must be made to demystify the technology early on in the course. Towards this the initial part of the course tends to move slower than the latter half. The idea is to get the students to feel comfortable with going on-line. Once the students start feeling comfortable and start viewing it as fun, it is easier to get them involved in many of the projects slated for the latter half. Hence many of the classes in the initial part of the course are held in computer labs with access to the internet.

The initial exercises are simple ones such as students sending an e-mail to the instructor with a brief background about themselves and the reason they chose to enroll in the course. This introduces them to e-mail. After they are comfortable doing that, they submit addresses of five sites from which files related to business can be downloaded.

A mailing list and a newsgroup are set up for the class. The mailing list is called mktinet to signify marketing on the internet and the newsgroup is called lsu.marketing. These are established so that the students would become familiar with the working of the mailing lists/listserv and newsgroups. Other than the ones established for the course, the students have to also enroll in four other mailing lists and newsgroups. This gives them an experience of participating in the newsgroups and listservs.¹ The students prepare reports on the mailing lists and newsgroups that they subscribe to after monitoring it for a fortnight.

Questions are posted every week in the newsgroup that the students have to respond to. After the first couple of weeks, the students are requested to not only merely answer questions but also to agree/disagree with positions taken by other students. Thus the newsgroup provides an avenue for discussions. Similarly the mailing list is used as a forum to discuss issues related to the class. This is the “virtual class” and the class participation points are awarded only for participation in this class, thereby ensuring active participation from all the students.

A conference in a corporate setting is simulated with a Internet Relay Chat (IRC) exercise. For this a channel is set up. The students logon to the channel where the instructor asks them to participate in an Internet

¹ listservs and mailing lists are used interchangeably, as are newsgroups and Usenet.

Scavenger Hunt as suggested by Leonard and Leonard (1996). In a corporate setting the future corporate executives may have to participate in conferences on the net. In such cases they would be able to easily retrieve information from documents and participate effectively in the conference. This exercise is generally popular with the students. Students who do not participate in class discussions shed their inhibitions to participate in the IRC.

Group assignments are designed to simulate the corporate environment and help students work in-groups. The groups analyze the homepage of a particular company and describe the strategy based on the content. Moreover as a part of the exercise they suggest strategy modifications for the company to have a more effective internet presence. For the first project the students develop a Resource Guide. This is to condition them to prepare corporate reports about a given topic. The students are given the option of working in-groups because in a business setting they may have to work with their peers to prepare the reports.

Case studies of hypothetical companies are also assigned to the groups. A brief history of a hypothetical company along with a product range is provided to each group. They have to decide whether the company needs to have an internet presence and if so, determine its strategy. The students have to use their knowledge about the various components of the internet and different marketing concepts in completing this project.

The final assignment is the development of a home page using HTML (Hyper Text Markup Language). The home page thus developed has to be evaluated for content and presentation style. Students are encouraged to use images, icons and interactive messages, where necessary.

Profile of the Class

The class had an enrollment of 19 students with varied backgrounds. A majority of them (12) were enrolled in the business school. While three students had been on the net for more than six months and were well versed with various features of the net, eight students had never been exposed to the Internet. The rest of the class had used the e-mail some time in the past but did not have any other knowledge about the net. Since the class had such a varied background it was important to bring those with no exposure to the net on the same level as others as quickly as possible. This was done by holding extra classes for those with no exposure in the evenings and helping them separately thus devoting more time to them and their “teething” problems.

Six weeks after the class began the students were given an opportunity to provide feedback on their expectations of the course and how it had measured up to it. Most students seemed happy at the pace with which the class was progressing. However some students with previous exposure to the net wanted the class to proceed at a faster pace. Considering their prior knowledge they wanted more marketing content in the course. However since the first half of the course was designed to provide the tools and the second half was designed for the application of the tools it was felt that the class had progressed as desired. All the students felt that the course was a useful one and had practical significance in their future career.

CONCLUSION

Teaching on the net is not a new concept. In fact using the Internet to teach has been suggested at this same forum earlier by Leonard and Leonard (1996). However this is an experiential essay on a course that was

offered at a South Eastern University. The syllabus for the course and the course content can be found at <http://www.bus.lsu.edu/marketing/courses/4414-2/index.htm>

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