

EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISE WITH MULTINATIONAL STUDENT TEAMS: RESEARCHING TOGETHER A MULTINATIONAL CORPORATION AND DEVELOPING JOINTLY A STRATEGIC MARKETING PLAN FOR IT USING BLACKBOARD

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ABSTRACT

This brief paper describes the theoretical basis and practical essence of an experiential exercise in the area of international marketing focusing on joint research and development of a strategic marketing plan, relying on teamwork in multinational student teams and using Blackboard as a working platform.

INTRODUCTION

Basic teaching methodologies in international marketing courses, where marketing strategy issues are typically covered, are still largely lecture and/or class discussion in format with students taking more passive roles (Clow and Wachter 1996). An analysis of current leading international marketing textbooks finds the predominant use of discussion questions, problems, and/or small case scenarios to encourage application of strategy-oriented material (Kotler and Armstrong 1999; Lamb, Hair, and McDaniel 2000; Zikmund and D'Amico 1999). Analyzing the instructor's manuals for such texts yields similar results with respect to discussion questions and cases (Brooks 2001; Brooks and Brooks 2003; Lemel 2002).

All of these considerations elevate the significance of experiential exercises in that they attempt to ease the difficulty of teaching marketing strategy through the use of concise, subject-specific, business situations. Experiential exercises have grown in popularity in business courses likely because they mirror the environment in which businesspeople actually function—making decisions under conditions of uncertainty without perfect information.

Marketing strategy is often included as an element within larger, more general experiential learning approach. Furthermore, this exercise is also novel in that it attempts to integrate concepts from marketing, finance, and economics. Integrated courses in business education are becoming much more common. This shift toward a more cross-functional and integrated curriculum has allowed students concentrating in one area or “major” to see the way business disciplines work together (DeConinck and Steiner

1999). Beyond providing students with a “real-life” cross-disciplinary business experience in marketing strategy formulation and implementation, this exercise also has been enhanced to allow students to examine reactions to various changes in the environment. The marketer must understand the relationship between marketing strategy and product demand before strategy formulation can even be attempted (Kotler and Armstrong 1999).

Because consumers have been shown to possess a range of acceptable choices for any given product (Janiszewski and Lichtenstein 1999), the exercise lets students see firsthand the impact of demand within a range of environmental conditions. The competitive nature of marketing strategy and, in particular, aggressive strategic decisions is another area of unique interest to researchers (Guiltinan and Gundlach 1996). In fact, competition in the marketing area is considered the “number one” problem facing many in marketing management (Kotler and Armstrong 1999), but the importance of this issue is difficult to demonstrate to students. Through the use of this innovative exercise is given a sense of reality to the process of student learning.

THE EXERCISE

I trust that student knowledge and understanding of conceptual issues is very important, but I consider that insufficient to prepare our students to face successfully the challenges of the workplace in the 21st century. Therefore, I feel obligated to help my students acquire appropriate skills and competencies. As this task goes beyond the cognitive perspective on learning, I like involving them in case writing and doing structured research.

In order to improve student teamwork skills and international awareness, I like to conduct the following experiential exercise in the area of marketing strategy.

First, I enroll in my class students from our partner institutions in Europe and Asia. Secondly, I group the students in multinational teams, trying to achieve as much diversity in terms of demographic characteristics and possible.

Using Blackboard as a working platform, each team is

supposed to select a multinational company under my guidance (the company should not be based in the same country where a team's member presently resides). Students should then study the business environment in 5 major country markets, in which this multinational corporation is involved. Teams are guided how to use interviews with company officials, the Internet, library sources, company reports, and embassy sources for gathering relevant information. Moreover, students should make in-depth analyses of the collected information, in order to complete their company case. Every case should report information on the following issues:

1. Analysis of the environment in each one of the selected 5 host-countries:
 - α. Socio-cultural environment
 - β. Economic environment
 - γ. Political and legal sectors of the environment
 - δ. Technological environment
2. The corporate strategy of the selected MNC, as well as the entry strategies used in its 5 country markets;
3. Analysis of the marketing mix of the selected multinational company;
4. Most significant strategic marketing issues/problems faced by the selected company in the international arena focusing on the selected 5 country markets;
5. Business plan developed to resolve the identified issues. Students are supposed provide as much elaborate information as possible, in order to explain what they would have done to implement their ideas and/or the plans of the actual marketing managers.

The best student cases are sponsored using funds raised by me, in order to present their research findings at selected international conferences and student meetings. This initiative has been found to stimulate tremendously experiential learning (bringing together affective and behavioral dimensions of learning), which to a large extent leads to the development of vital practical skills and competencies.

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