

Developments in Business Simulation and Experiential Learning, Volume 29, 2002

USING PROJECT-BASED EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING GROUPS IN THE PRINCIPLES OF MARKETING COURSE

Nicholson, Carolyn Y.
Stetson University
cynichol@stetson.edu

Oliphant, Becky J.
Stetson University
boliphan@stetson.edu

ABSTRACT

Experiential education has been used successfully in management classes for years but integrating it into other disciplines has been a challenge for those attempting to do so. A principles of marketing course could be seen as nothing more than a series of lectures followed up by multiple choice exams.

In the current paper two strategies for using experiential projects in a principles of marketing course are discussed. Each of these experiential based classes allows the student to take basic marketing terms and turn them into a full semester project with implications for product, price, promotion and distribution. The final project is one the students feel connected with, and a presentation that is enjoyable for both professor and student.

INTRODUCTION

It is very tempting for a service course like Principles of Marketing to be reduced to a series of lectures followed up by multiple-choice exams. After all, the logic goes, we should be covering only the basics so that students get a broad-based understanding. Lectures and tests, with the odd report or case analysis thrown in, are sufficient for the task, right? But the required core courses are critical to students' understanding of the functional area. They should be treated as an opportunity to attract students to the major and increase students' sophistication with the concepts rather than as a liability, or worse, as a commodity. Most importantly, a little creativity can transform dull, boring textbook marketing principles into a hands-on and fun learning tool. The solution is to incorporate project-based experiences into the Principles of Marketing course. Projects are fun, project work demonstrates marketing in action, and projects are flexible to the professor's goals for the course.

An additional consideration is that students from other countries who are studying in the United States bring with them a rich cultural heritage and perspective that many American students seldom bother to explore. It is important

to study marketing with an international perspective. The marketplace is changing drastically—the recent developments in U.S. trade agreements with Canada, Mexico and Japan, the rise of the EU, and the demise of the Soviet state and its consequences are just a few of the global changes happening around us. Project-based courses provide excellent opportunities to integrate this global focus into students' understanding of marketing planning.

We have taught this course over 25 times, at a variety of institutions, large and small. We have come to a several conclusions regarding student performance in the Principles of Marketing Course when it is taught using project-based experiential learning:

- **understanding of marketing principles increases dramatically;**
- **understanding of the interrelated nature of the elements of the marketing mix is improved;**
- **ability to appreciate time pressure, the sequential and iterative nature of marketing planning, and complex decision-making skills are improved;**
- **learning about and appreciation of other cultures improves as international students bring their unique culture to the class as a valued commodity;**
- **retention of concepts lasts longer, not only within the course but after completion of the course;**
- **skills such as team management, time management, conflict resolution, and professional communication are emphasized; and**
- **enjoyment and excitement become a part of the course, making the learning experience fun as well as educational and, not least of all, attractive to students as a major.**

THE PROJECT-BASED EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING APPROACH

The project-based Principles of Marketing course uses a team project over the entire semester. The key task is the development of a professional, complete marketing plan. Students learn about the complexities and the interrelatedness of the marketing plan by actually doing it

Developments in Business Simulation and Experiential Learning, Volume 29, 2002

rather than just reading about it. With a real product on which to focus their attention, one that they have a vested (i.e., grade) interest in, the students perceive the marketing problems as more concrete and real than some other firm's products and problems. Students who have been through a project-based Principles of Marketing Course will tell you that developing the marketing plan is a great deal of work and that it's much more difficult in practice than they supposed when reading about it.

It is important to note that the project component of the course is a supplement to lectures, discussions, or other analyses in class. Most (the large majority) of the project work is done outside of class time, where students apply the concepts learned in class to the problems associated with the development of their own projects.

While there are certainly variations, we have found the most successful type of project for the Principles of Marketing course is the new product development exercise. Teams are charged with the creation of a wholly new product, with identification and profiling of their target market(s), and assessment of the feasibility of the idea. Brands are created; packaging is designed; advertising is created; pricing is set; retailing and distribution is planned—all of the elements of the marketing mix are included. Project teams perform a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis and explore the competitive environment. The groups complete the project by creating a professional presentation to potential investors. In our experience, the resulting professional documents are often showcase works that are later used to persuade employment recruiters of potential candidates' skills and abilities.

There are two primary variations of this exercise that we will explain below. While they are similar to each other in the basic task, the emphases of the projects differ somewhat. After we explain these variations, we briefly explore other variations of the project-based experience.

One of the more difficult tasks in new product development is managing the creative process of idea generation. Selecting feasible product ideas from pipedream products is a critical step that students must experience to fully appreciate. This variation of the new product project has the distinction that student teams brainstorm for product ideas with no constraints regarding the nature of the product or its market(s). Domestic product marketing is very complex; still, we encourage professors using this variation not to restrict discussions to strictly domestic issues.

Students form (or are formed) into project teams of 4-5 persons. They are given basic guidelines for the project and a detailed outline of the marketing plan. They are also provided with a workbook of related exercises that will help the students work through the development of the product. Successful use of these exercises will not complete the project; instead the exercises involve support work. Exercises include brainstorming, benefits analysis, brand name generation, competitive analysis, primary market

research with focus groups, distribution planning, and promotions planning.

At the conclusion of the project, teams submit a formal written report and present their new product ideas to the class as if they were speaking to potential investors. Presentations are scheduled for one half hour, with a 20-minute formal report followed by a question period.

An interesting variation of this project involves introducing a product in a foreign country, along with the research and development of the marketing plan required to bring such a product to fruition.

The professor begins by visiting the foreign students office and obtaining a list of international students, organized by country of origin. Try to locate students from a variety of countries representing different geographic, economic, and cultural systems. It is best to stay away from countries represented by students in the current Principles of Marketing class. Instead, focus on countries from all over the globe, choosing an eastern country, a western country, a communist country, a Spanish-speaking country, and one where the culture is similar to the U.S., such as Canada. It is interesting to note that Canada tends to be one of the most difficult to use because the differences in culture, the legal and regulatory environment, and marketing channels, while subtle, have a strong impact on how a product can be marketed.

Students are assigned to groups of four to six persons. Teams "bid" on a country they would like to research from a list provided. Make up cards ahead of time, each identifying a simple consumer product, such as soap, soup, candy, fragrance, breakfast food, snack food, sports drink, toothpaste, sports shoe, or quick meal. Each team randomly selected a card with a product (unseen) on it.

The students must then use the "four Ps" of marketing (product, price, place, promotion) to guide specific product development. They conduct a SWOT analysis for the selected country. Teams must research the laws and trade regulations (e.g., tariffs) for the target country. Teams do a basic geographic profile and a brief history of the target country. Finally, each team must interview at least two people native to the country. Give them a list of current international students, although they may interview anyone who is native to their target country. Suggest that they invite the interviewees to the final presentation at the end of the semester.

The interview with a native of the target country is a critical learning experience. At times, a less than full command of the English language can make it difficult for international students to convey subtleties. However, these interviews are such an important part of the project because it forces students to deal with people from other cultures and attempt to understand their cultures beyond what they might learn on the Internet. For example, students from socialist or communist countries often reveal significant differences between what students have read and what the reality of everyday life is in that country.

Developments in Business Simulation and Experiential Learning, Volume 29, 2002

Other variations are possible. One variation could be to take an existing project and market it overseas with new variations based on international student interviews. An example would be Coke marketed in Japan with honey to satisfy the Japanese taste for extra sweetness. Or a product like Oreo cookies would add or take away a flavor based on where in the world the product was introduced.

Another variation could be interviewing the international students first and discovering a need in that country. Students could then fill that need (candy, soap, perfume, fast food, etc.) based on the interviews. Or students can partner with international students already in the class. These international students could become the project managers and help lead their group in the introduction of a product into their home country based on expert knowledge.

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Regardless of the variation the professor selects, a number of practical issues must be addressed, including weights of assignments, grading, and professorial oversight needs.

We recommend that students be rewarded handsomely for this work. As stated, much of the work is performed outside of class time. Moreover, unsurprisingly, we have found that a significantly weighted project increases motivation.

We recommend that the grade weight of the written report be roughly two and a half times that of the presentation. We weigh the assignments as follows: 25% of final grade for project report and 10% for the formal oral presentation. Given that these are group projects, we also have students complete a group evaluation. Feedback from the group about a team member's poor performance is used for input in calculating that student's individual grade.

In our experience, most students will rise to the occasion and create reports of which they can be duly proud. The written marketing plans are graded in terms of completeness, level of sophistication in analysis, appropriate application of marketing principles, clarity of the logic for their decisions, and professionalism of the report (including grammar and style).

Oral presentations are graded in terms of the team's ability to distill the contents of the marketing plan into a 20-minute presentation, persuasiveness of the presentation, ability to answer questions from the audience and the professor, and presentation skills. Presentations are expected to be well-prepared, rehearsed, and professionally presented. Under no circumstances should students be allowed to simply read a report.

We schedule one out-of-class session on writing the report and one on presenting the report so that team members will know the expectations for project outcomes. Teams may send representatives to these extra meetings, although high-performance teams will often all attend.

In addition to any required exercises or assignments, each group will need to have at least one meeting with the professor during the semester to discuss problems that occur or questions the team may have. We suggest that the professor be willing to review rough drafts of report sections or at least provide detailed guidance regarding the report. We also make past projects available to students for review.

While it may sound as if there is an overwhelming amount of work on the professor's part to set up and oversee these types of projects, student reactions to the projects have been very positive and enthusiastic. A side benefit for the professor is that s/he personally enjoys the class and can learn much about international markets.

CONCLUSION

We have discovered this method of teaching principles of marketing to be enormously worthwhile and enjoyable. While effortful on the part of the professor and the student, these projects give students in the major a real jump-start in their learning. When they begin their studies with complex experiential problems, they are able to make practical strategic decisions and think in "real-world" terms throughout their advanced courses.

Students have used their projects for research forums, enclosed them in portfolios, and included them under marketing experience on job applications. We regularly hear from recruiters how impressed they are with the scope and quality of these projects. Students have said these projects were the most creative project they done in their four years of college.

The project takes a course of definitions and brings it to life. The students we have taught look forward to each chapter as one step closer to finishing their final project. The final projects have been well written, professionally presented and very interesting for all parties involved (students, groups and professors).