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Marketing Me: A case study on the evolution of an MBA marketing competence exercise

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Abstract

The importance of marketing competence among recent graduates is well documented in pedagogical conversations concerning business education and training (Le Diest & Winterton 2005; Winterton et al 2005; Wellman 2010). The current discussion offers a case study on the evolution of a reflective marketing competency exercise entitled, "Marketing Me." Used as part of a core marketing course within a U.S. MBA program over a 10-year period, we describe how the one-page, one-hour assignment has not only led to successful learning and professional outcomes for students, but also improved faculty effectiveness when technological aspects were incorporated.

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1. Introduction

When considering the skill set currently required of successful classroom educators, Roessingh and Chambers (2011) referencing Barrett (2005) state "There is a distinct shift from a lecture-based approach to an open-ended process-oriented model associated with critical theory that values inquiry, reflection, negotiation of meaning, case and problem-based learning (PBL), discussion and collaboration, and self-directed learning." (Roessingh &

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Chambers, 2011, p. 60). Accordingly, educators perpetually seek innovative instructional techniques that will further enhance the learning experience of students. This pursuit is complicated by the need to better equip freshly-minted MBA students—and marketing students in particular—with highly-employable skills. (Li, Greenberg, & Nicholls, 2007; Taylor, Hunter, Gary, Melton, & Goodwin, 2011).

As employers continue to demand graduates who are independent, adaptable, and capable, graduate schools have encountered an influx of students with fewer and fewer years of business practice. (Smith, 2004; Maital, et al., 2008). In response educators have incorporated a variety of pedagogical approaches that facilitate practical learning in less-experienced classrooms. Curricular modifications range from simulations (Li, et al.) to live cases (Heriot, et al., 2008) to service learning projects (Milewicz and Partridge, 2014) —each achieving consistent, though moderate, success in numerous, varied contexts. (Young, et al., 2008). The current case study highlights a graduate marketing course component called “Marketing Me” (modeled after a marketing plan) that compliments experiential learning via the application of critical thinking at the intersection of theory and practice.

In this overview we describe the Marketing Me activity, showcase the ways in which it cultivates marketing competence via creative and independent thought, discuss the role of technology in enhancing the learning process, and offer anecdotal evidence of successful learning and professional outcomes.

2. Building Marketing Competence via Coursework

The marketing plan has served as a reliable cornerstone for both development and assessment in a variety of marketing courses especially Marketing Principles (Smith, K., 2004; Wellman 2010; Taylor, et al., 2011). Because a marketing plan readily meets the requirement by “consensus” that marketing education be practitioner oriented with a focus on “relevant marketing knowledge and skills,” (Wellman, p. 120) its examination is a course staple. Wellman (2011) posits Werienga’s (2002) framework of the relationship between academic marketing knowledge (i.e., marketing laws/principles and empirical generalizations) and marketing knowledge used by practitioners (i.e., experience, creativity, and intuition) as a foundational aspect of marketing competence. Winterton et al.’s (2005) unified typology further frames the import of theory and practice by classifying competence into cognitive, functional, meta-competence, and social arenas. Accordingly, the successful development of a marketing plan as a co-created pedagogical output serves as a reasonable proxy and suitable amalgamation of both academic (e.g., consumer behavior) and practitioner knowledge (e.g., market sizing) in judging marketing competence.

2.1. The assignment

The Marketing Me assignment was derived from an original exercise we created for students’ first day of the core marketing course. At the end of the first class session they split into teams and received a sheet of paper with a blank one-page template/outline of a marketing plan. Key components included a situation analysis, environmental scan, competitive analysis, target market, positioning and the four Ps, implementation, and controls. Students were instructed to, “Generate a skeleton marketing plan for [Their current school] based on what you feel the school is currently doing.” Further instructions were, “Have fun with this. Be as creative as you’d like to be and do the best you can. I will review them, but this will not be graded.” (See Figure 1 for one-page marketing plan template). From there students wrestled with some unfamiliar terms and concepts such as positioning and contingency planning, but constructed a bulleted SWOT analysis more easily. The groups’ sheets were collected before the end of that class period. The students appreciated the chance to “try their hand” at market planning and the exercise served as a preamble to the main course deliverable of a marketing plan for a live case with a (typically) local company. Additionally, the introductory exercise served as a coarse benchmark of students’ current marketing knowledge. This was helpful for comparative purposes in assessing the progress made by the time Marketing Me was assigned later in the course.

"Day One" Assignment: "Marketing Graziadio" **Group Members:** _____

Generate a skeleton marketing plan for The Graziadio School based on what you feel the school is currently doing. Have fun with this. Be as creative as you'd like to be and do the best you can. I will review them, but this will not be graded.

- Situation Analysis:** The Product or Service Offering: How does the school position itself? What is the current situation they face?
- Market Summary:** Market Demographics/ Geographical/ Psychographical/ Behavioral/ Needs/ Trends/ Growth
- Competition**

Strengths	Weaknesses
Opportunities	Threats

- Marketing Objectives**
- Marketing Strategies**

6.1. Target Markets	
6.2. Positioning	
6.3.1. Product	
6.3.2. Price	
6.3.3. Promotion	
6.3.4. Service	
6.3.5. Place	
- Marketing Research**
- Controls**
 - Implementation**
 - Contingency Planning**

Fig. 1. One-page marketing plan template

2.2. Creative and independent thought

Debriefing this opening exercise provided numerous opportunities to expand on the various aspects of the marketing plan and explain how corporations employ them to execute company missions and goals. The “snapshot” approach required brevity in capturing key aspects of marketing activity and further served to orient students to the terse and intentional argument development expected in business communication (Munter & Hamilton, 2014). Indeed employers often cite stellar oral and written skills as highly desirable in hiring candidates (Smith, 2004; Li, et al. 2007; Heriot, et al 2008; Wellman 2010).

The assignment was a well-received confidence booster that helped students frame the marketing plan as a road map for the live case in the course. Keeping in mind an educator’s obligation to holistic student development (Saye & Brush, 1999; Wellman 2010), applying this one-page guide to personal and professional pursuits flowed naturally. As students repeatedly sought counsel about how to align their lives and career with their skills and dreams, Marketing Me not only offered them tools to navigate tough questions, it also cemented marketing principles at the individual instructional level. Rather than prescribe the assignment for career advancement purposes only, students had no boundaries on how they might market themselves. Selections ranged from a national president to CEO to fiancée to favorite child in the family to a modern day superhero and beyond. Figure 2 shows how the assignment was modified for individual assessment.

Generate a skeleton marketing plan outline that markets YOU. Have fun with this.
 Be as creative as you'd like to be. You can market yourself for any of the following:

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> a new job | <input type="checkbox"/> a new love interest |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a new position in current job | <input type="checkbox"/> a new friend |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a volunteer position | <input type="checkbox"/> a new parent |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a political office | <input type="checkbox"/> other? _____ |
-

Fig. 2. Marketing Me instructions

Having had previous exposure to a one-page template marketing plan, students adapted well to the task of creating a thumbnail marketing plan that focused on them individually. Nevertheless logistical and readability challenges prompted several students over the years to request electronic delivery of the assignment instead of paper and pen.

3. Technological Transformation

In an effort to incorporate technology and possibly improve readability, five years after inception, the Marketing Me was administered via a Qualtrics survey. The students were still assigned an in-class, one-hour time limit and were not permitted to use external helps or notes. The assignment remained a written elaboration of the “30-second elevator pitch” (Kolah, A. 2016). While readability improved, the inability to assign character limits defeated secondary assignment goals of succinctness. The task returned to paper and pen mode until the adoption of Google Forms a few years later, which not only allowed for the classic presentation of the plan as a one-page summary, but also imposed both time and space limits. In the latest iteration of the assignment, students were permitted to complete it offline, with an honor code (and timestamp) for a one hour limit. This latest approach yielded the most consistently positive student outcomes and faculty experiences thus far.

3.1 Technology: Process over Product

In his landmark book chronicling the historical evolution of educational technology as far back as 450 B.C., Saettler’s (1990) compilation, *The Evolution of American Educational Technology* assembles multiple studies of how technology and specifically educational technology has evolved to improve learning over the millennia. Most interestingly, Saettler’s (1990) definition of technology has more to do with the process and outcome than it does with a product or machine. He explains, “If technology is to be completely understood, in either ancient or modern terms, it should be seen as a system of practical knowledge not necessarily reflected in things or hardware” (Saettler, 2004, p. 3). This concept of technology being more about process than product is adeptly modeled in the current context where the prevalence of technology has created new needs for students and concurrently educators. The development and creation of a Google Form to complete the Marketing Me assignment offline released classroom time for other activities and allowed the students to have an even stronger sense of independence and self-sufficiency in completing Marketing Me. It also sets the stage for students to take the assignment to another level. For example, they may respond to the charge to generate a one-page marketing plan for a new product or idea with formats that may include multimedia elements such as video or VoiceThread or even YouTube.

3.2 Technology: Instruction Integration

Lelouche (1998) suggests that due to the fact that the student or trainee will become more autonomous and by default more responsible for his/her learning, “the role of all types of teachers...will also have to adapt to that evolution...” as the traditional classroom becomes less commonplace (p. 306). One increasingly popular response is

the blended classroom environment. Keengwe and Kang (2012) offer blended learning as an important alternative that provides both the dynamic exchange of face-to-face interaction with the self-paced flexibility of online learning by pulling on the best aspects of both learning formats. This results in more “effective [increased] students’ satisfaction and faculties’ responses” (Wingard, 2004, as cited by Keengwe & Kang, 2012, p. 82).

This field of technology integration is still relatively new with regards to the education world (Bliuc, et al. 2007). However, it is clear to see that this trend is not a fad; computers, tablets, the Internet, and blended learning are all here to stay (AFT, 2003; Keengwe & Kang, 2012). While we celebrate the positive aspects of technology on student learning, we must recognize the crucial role that teachers play in guiding and nurturing the method of knowledge acquisition and that masterful application is inexorably linked to holistic student growth (Saye & Brush, 1999). Veteran educators will need to adjust to technology integration into the classroom as the work of Baldi (1997) shows that age is a non-factor in regards to completion and correctness of tasks.

Furthermore, agile use of technology benefits both student and teacher not only in terms of delivery and engagement as discussed earlier, but also with respect to assessment, and feedback. Capturing student responses electronically allows for quicker and more efficient aggregation and manipulation of the data to detect patterns in responses and also uncover potential learning gaps. For example, downloading student Marketing Me responses from a Google Form into an Excel spreadsheet facilitates more direct comparisons across multiple students for specific learning assessment goals. Depending on the nature of the student activity, teachers can be well-positioned to make on-the-spot adjustments to the teaching plan based on the data collected in order to address areas of student comprehension deficiency. The speed of analysis also facilitates prompter feedback from the teacher, which is often conducive to stimulating creative and insightful student deliverables (Denny, Payan, Reardon, & Kling, 2007).

4. Findings and Implications

While the components of a marketing plan have not changed significantly in the past 10 years, the level of dynamism in the marketplace that students now encounter has increased drastically. Globalization, complex market diversity, and the lightning speed of information flow via the Internet—namely social media—have all demanded conscious effort on the part of marketing professors to explicate how staple elements of a marketing plan (i.e., segmentation, targeting, and positioning strategies) are developed in real time and via multiple modalities. For instance, the increased presence and use of social media in students’ consumption experiences has had an impact on how they describe consumer searching behavior (shorter) and how they profile target markets (ironically less refined). An unfortunate result is that students often seem tempted to assume that their social networks—via Facebook, Instagram, or LinkedIn, for example—make suitable target markets that will be eager co-laborers in achieving a variety of marketing objectives. Accordingly it behooves instructors to incorporate multiple methods of engagement (e.g., videos, online gaming exercises, social media, in-class polls, etc.) to help students better grasp both the potential benefits and limitations of technology. A hybrid exercise that employs both traditional and technology-based approaches such as Marketing Me encourages students to test their grasp over core marketing principles by applying them to the most complex and dynamic marketplace they know—themselves.

4.1. Student Outcomes

Students were asked to indicate whether or not their Marketing Me plans were confidential in order to determine which ones would be shared orally with the class (average class size was 22 students). For those who were willing, the professor read certain aspects of the plan and the class would try to determine which student prepared it. We estimate that roughly 600 Marketing Me assignments were generated over the past 10 years; however, no other formal means of permission for data collection were pursued. Nevertheless, there has been consistency in the nearly even distribution of marketing plans among 1) serious-career-related pursuits, 2) serious-personal pursuits, 3) inventive/creative/aspirational pursuits, and 4) absurd/comical pursuits. Classes populated with fully-employed MBA students, however, were more likely to submit plans that belonged to the first two categories vs. the last two. Still the playfulness with which many students approached this activity reflects Denny, et al.’s (2007) observation

that marketing students in particular and business students in general appreciate the important role that creativity plays in business.

Even more affirming than the verbal accolades and appreciation received after this exercise are the emails from students who as a result of implementing their Marketing Me plans have received job promotions, secured new jobs, established new relationships (i.e., engagement), and launched entrepreneurial ventures. Completing the exercise also had an appreciative impact on the live case marketing plan that was the main course deliverable. Sections that did not include the Marketing Me exercise as part of the course tended to have a weaker grasp on target definition and positioning, for example. As part of preparation for the exercise students receive a blank template; therefore this tool becomes theirs to keep, modify, and leverage long after their time in the course.

4.2. Implications for Faculty

Marketing Me will continue to be an integral part of our graduate business marketing course and we anticipate additional technological experimentation and refinement as digital advances and morphing social mores will likely make new demands of both students and professors.

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