

INTEGRATING CONCEPTS ACROSS MARKETING COURSES VIA EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports a two-course curriculum innovation designed to facilitate student learning of the integrative nature of marketing. This integration is achieved via a client-sponsored project spanning two courses, where concepts and output from one course (Marketing Research) feed directly into the concepts and output of another marketing course (Integrated Marketing Communications). Detail is included on project goals and structure, assessment of the project, and a review of lessons learned.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of integration among business courses has received considerable attention in recent years, both in terms of integration across disciplines (Hamilton, McFarland, and Mirchandani 2000; Heinfeldt and Wolf 1998; Pharr and Morris 1997) and within the marketing field (Bobbitt et al. 2000; Elam and Spotts 2004). A common theme within this call for integration is the need to help students understand the linkages between the concepts and tools acquired in discrete business courses. University marketing students typically take several required and elective courses in the discipline. Each of these courses is generally self-contained with unique pedagogies and content. Students are expected to see the linkages between the courses, but in many cases are left to either discover these connections on their own or realize the synergies through examples presented by faculty. It's no surprise when students reach the capstone marketing strategy course, many are not well equipped to knit the various content areas together. As Bobbit et al. (2000) lament, students often complete their marketing curriculum without a solid understanding and appreciation of the interrelationships that exist among the many subject areas of marketing. Likewise, when they enter the job market they are often unable to see the "big picture" of marketing since they are accustomed to seeing marketing as individual components.

A related problem is the reluctance and/or inability of marketing students to make data-driven marketing strategy recommendations. Too often we see students eager to suggest marketing strategies and tactics without first conducting a thorough analysis of the situation and supporting those decisions with existing data. The discrete nature of marketing courses exacerbates this problem as prior data or content from other marketing areas is oftentimes lacking. Decisions are thus made in isolation from

other marketing content areas and lack external validity.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the efficacy of a two-course curriculum innovation designed to enhance students' ability to integrate marketing content, and also utilize prior content in the development of marketing strategies. Featuring a client-sponsored project, the integration required students to generate, collect and analyze data from one core marketing course (Marketing Research), and funnel this data directly into the strategic development process of another core offering (Integrated Marketing Communications). Post-hoc focus group data and other assessments suggest the curriculum innovation was effective in making salient the need for marketing concept integration.

We begin by providing an overview of the aims and structure of the project. This is followed by a discussion of project execution and assessment of learning outcomes. The paper concludes with a review of lessons learned, guidance for implementation and a discussion of limitations.

BACKGROUND

Several innovative attempts to integrate marketing curriculum appear in literature. The primary integration mechanism in these examples occurs via experiential learning. Experiential learning has a strong history in marketing education. It has proven effective in the application of content and the ability to demonstrate linkages between actions and outcomes (Dev 1990; Gaidis and Andrews 1990; Karns 2005). Bobbitt et al. (2000) use an experiential approach centered around a student-crafted project, incorporating students from three concurrent marketing courses (principles, personal selling and sales management). This project occurs during one semester with students from each of the three courses participating in the project with different roles (e.g., personal selling

students function as perspective customers attending a trade show conducted by students from the marketing principles class). Elam and Spotts (2004) also incorporate a project across three distinct marketing courses and utilize a client-based project. Their approach also employs a single semester project with students from different courses collaborating together.

While instructor or student generated projects (e.g., Bobbitt et al. 2000) can provide valuable learning experiences, client-sponsored projects (e.g., Elam and Spotts 2004) have shown to be useful in courses such as marketing research (Humphreys 1981; Specht 1985). Client-sponsored projects stimulate and challenge students and are highly rated by students for contributing to their learning (Karns 1993, 2005). Our approach for integrating marketing content across courses uses a client-sponsored project but differs from the previously described methods in a significant way. We coordinate a live client-sponsored project in consecutive semesters, across two courses, marketing research and integrated marketing communications (IMC). This approach allows students to not only participate in both courses, but to stream data and findings for both courses. We believe this tack is superior to the single-semester conventions described earlier since students participate in the project via multiple roles. The approach was also purposefully broad in scope to expose students to virtually all the tools and concepts under the rubric of marketing research and integrated marketing communications.

The project was executed via a relationship with the General Motors Marketing Internship (GMMI), affording students the opportunity to manage a \$2,500 budget (provided by the client); conduct market research; design a promotional campaign; provide an agency-style presentation to the client; implement a major event promotion; and conduct follow-up research measuring the success of the IMC program. The GMMI program involved the coordination and cooperation of multiple parties including the General Motors Corporation, a local Pontiac dealership, students enrolled in the two marketing classes, and a third-party program facilitator, EdVenture Partners. General Motors and the local Pontiac dealer were the clients. EdVenture Partners served as liaison between the student group, the dealership and General Motors by providing project planning assistance, product literature, and feedback concerning strategies proffered by the student groups. While the GMMI program is used in colleges across the U.S., to our knowledge our application of the GMMI program is the only one to implement the program across two classes over two semesters.

The primary objectives of the GMMI program include:

- ◆ Measuring target market (college students) attitudes and perceptions of the Pontiac automotive brand.

- ◆ Measuring and increasing target market awareness and purchase consideration of Pontiac.
- ◆ Increasing target market awareness of the local Pontiac dealership.

While the GMMI project fit our needs, we envision applying this approach to any client interested in an IMC project supported by marketing research.

INCORPORATING THE PROJECT INTO INDIVIDUAL COURSES

While virtually all of our marketing students take both the Marketing Research course and the IMC course, we cannot guarantee the order in which the courses are taken nor if they'll be taken in consecutive semesters. Accordingly, we had to design each individual course to stand alone. Since both instructors typically use experiential learning via projects, our goal was to link the courses with a common project that could be compartmentalized into individual courses so learning outcomes for students taking only a single course would not be compromised. Below we address how the project fit into each individual course.

Incorporating the Project into the Marketing Research Course

The GMMI project served as an integral component of the Marketing Research class experience, affording a real world window through which to view the multiple steps of the research process. Project requirements included the completion of the following specific assignments:

- ◆ Develop Statement of Research Objectives.
- ◆ Secondary Data Analysis.
- ◆ Qualitative Data Analysis.
- ◆ Survey Development.
- ◆ Pretest Survey Instrument.
- ◆ Develop Sampling Plan.
- ◆ Administer Survey Instrument.
- ◆ Coding/Data Entry.
- ◆ Data Analysis.
- ◆ Report Preparation.

The project began with a visit from the clients (GMMI represented by EdVenture Partners and the local Pontiac dealer). Students discussed information needs with the clients and developed research objectives. From there, students conducted exploratory research using both secondary data and focus groups. This information was used to clarify the original research objectives and design the survey instrument.

The resulting survey instrument measured college students' current ownership status (e.g., own or lease); their likelihood of near-term automotive purchases including decision criteria like make and model, price, etc.; their attitudes and experiences with multiple automotive brands (including Pontiac); their top choices for future

purchase and their awareness of local dealerships. The Marketing Research course portion of the project concluded with oral and written presentation of findings to the clients. Findings from these research efforts were then passed on to the IMC course and provided solid guidance for students in formulating their IMC strategies the following semester.

Incorporating the Project into the Integrated Marketing Communications Course

An IMC perspective calls for a “big picture” approach to planning advertising and promotion programs and coordinating the various communication functions of an organization. The semester following the development and testing of the marketing research instrument and the collection of data, the aforementioned data was incorporated into the IMC class to assist in the development of a comprehensive integrated marketing communications program for Pontiac. The GMMI project served as a semester-long exercise to structure and communicate strategic learning points of the IMC class including: how companies effectively and efficiently use multiple IMC elements (e.g., advertising, direct marketing, event sponsorship, sale promotion) to accomplish their marketing objectives; how consumers respond to advertising messages and other forms of marketing communication; how communication is geared to meet different kinds of consumer needs; the advantages and disadvantages associated with various modes of communication; and how various message appeals, executions and strategies can be used effectively.

Per the objectives above, the GMMI IMC program was designed to enhance awareness, knowledge and purchase consideration for Pontiac automobiles and increase awareness of the local Pontiac dealership among the target market. The focus of the IMC program was the development and execution of a major on-campus promotional event highlighting the Pontiac Vibe and Pontiac Grand Am automobiles. To facilitate the event, students established a marketing firm, *Exciting Events*, elected an event and budget coordinator, and divided the remaining students into five distinct departments: research, event planning, public relations/publicity, advertising, and budget/reporting. A working plan and timetable were established at the beginning of the semester detailing department responsibilities and deadlines. The development of objectives, strategies, and benchmark measures for each department provided a direct experiential illustration of IMC course content.

A one-day campus music festival dubbed, “Y-Fest” (Generation Y), was developed by the event planning team to showcase the Pontiac brand and the local dealership. The festival was held in the campus central mini-park with music, food, outdoor games, and activities. A Pontiac Vibe and Grand Am were prominently displayed

in the park while four local bands played throughout the day. Incorporating a Pontiac theme, each of the activities offered chances for participants to win prizes. Per the data from the Marketing Research class, the IMC students’ believed it was critical for the college demographic to interact directly with the vehicles, thus showcasing the vehicles’ audio capabilities and directly addressing concerns regarding style and dependability.

Strategies were developed to jointly measure attendance and ensure students’ review of the sponsored Pontiac vehicles. Students were required to complete an entry form in order to take part in food, drinks, and event activities. Completion of the entry form required students to closely inspect both vehicles and answer questions regarding attitudes toward the vehicles. The entry form data was then compared to pre-event vehicle data, which provided a direct measure of change in students’ awareness, knowledge, attitudes, etc. Attendance at the festival included over 700 students who inspected and evaluated the Pontiac vehicles.

Following the event, each student department (research, event planning, public relations/publicity, advertising, and budget/reporting) prepared a detailed final report of the event and their performance as it related to objectives and benchmarks. These group reports were collapsed into one final report that was delivered to the faculty, the client, and the third party project facilitator. The IMC class final report included the following elements:

- ◆ Research,
- ◆ Pre-event survey,
- ◆ Post-event survey,
- ◆ Summary report,
- ◆ Event Planning,
- ◆ Campaign response form,
- ◆ Detailed report of event schedule and activities,
- ◆ Event layout,
- ◆ Event results,
- ◆ Summary report,
- ◆ Public Relations/Publicity,
- ◆ Media list,
- ◆ Media kit,
- ◆ Press releases/articles,
- ◆ Donations,
- ◆ Summary report,
- ◆ Advertising,
- ◆ Creative summary,
- ◆ Newspaper, television, radio, and web advertisements,
- ◆ Reach and frequency data,
- ◆ Summary report,
- ◆ Budget and Reporting,
- ◆ Estimated Budget,
- ◆ Departmental Expenses,
- ◆ Summary report.

ASSESSMENT

Assessment of the curriculum innovation and project objectives took place on multiple levels with multiple stakeholders including students from both classes, two faculty members, the local client (i.e., Pontiac automotive dealer), and the third party project facilitator (EdVenture Partners). The first step in the assessment process came at the conclusion of the Marketing Research class where students completed a detailed report of their research findings and presented these results to the client and their fellow students. The research report included a copy of the survey instrument, a discussion of pretest results, the coding scheme, a discussion of the data analysis procedure, and a summary of recommendations for the IMC class.

A second assessment involved a project report and presentation at the conclusion of the IMC course the following semester. As discussed above, students analyzed the existing data from the Marketing Research class and developed specific IMC strategies to accomplish the objectives put forth by the GMMI project. Following the major on-campus event, the IMC students assessed the effectiveness of their chosen strategies based on post-project market research and delivered the final project report to the faculty, client and EdVenture Partners. The reports and presentation provided a clear indication that students grasped the critical importance of course integration and data-driven strategy development. A review of the IMC class teaching evaluations illustrated strong student support for the project as an experiential learning exercise.

A further measure of support for the project came in the form of positive feedback from the third party project facilitator (regional manager of EdVenture Partners), confirming the faculty's belief the project accomplished intended curriculum objectives. Additionally, the manager was especially impressed with the success of the specific event (Y-Fest) and the successful working relationships between the distinct student groups.

A final measure of assessment was conducted in the weeks immediately following the conclusion of the IMC course. Using students' self-reports of the effectiveness of learning activities has shown to be useful (Karns 2005) and, accordingly, we conducted a focus group with twelve of the sixteen students who had taken both the Marketing Research and Integrated Marketing Communication courses. The goal of the focus group was to gather student insight into the efficacy of the curriculum integration and garner suggestions for improvement. The two major themes emanating from the discussion were the experiential, "real world" nature of the project and its integrative component. For example, all students felt that it was gratifying to "see their work in action" and see the results "after the fact." They also uniformly praised the "hands-on" expe-

rience and felt the project illustrated the "richness" of each topic area. All students agreed they saw the linkage between marketing research and IMC decisions and indicated the connection was obtained via the context of the project as opposed to formal/structural linkages. The term "whole package" was used to describe the experience, and despite some difficulties, all the students said they would strongly recommend the experience to other students. Finally, one project concern was the potential for student burnout for those taking both courses spanning two semesters. Fortunately, this was a non-issue for students in the focus group.

LESSONS LEARNED

Overall, the goal of this teaching approach is to help students develop a deeper understanding of the interrelationships between various components of marketing. Below is a review of lessons learned and suggestions for using this convention.

Pick the Correct Project: We recommend the use of client-sponsored projects that focus on marketing to college students. As noted in the "Background" section, client-sponsored projects lend a sense of realism to the project that instructor or student generated projects lack. Further, students commented on satisfaction associated with helping solve a real problem. In our focus group, students used words such as "ownership," "see our work in action," and "investment" to describe the project. These benefits accrue whether or not the project resides within a single course or spans multiple courses. When trying to tie multiple courses together with a single project, the client-sponsored approach becomes crucial with the client serving as a key integrating link. The presence of the client fosters continuity between courses and keeps the project goal-oriented.

Projects that focus on marketing to college students lend realism since students enter with some level of expertise and empathy. A challenge in any project is motivation and we find that project topics that are relevant to students result in more enthusiasm and involvement. When attempting to stretch a project across two semesters there is a concern with project fatigue. Our discussions with students during the project and afterwards during the focus group indicated that project fatigue was not an issue due to the project topic.

Pick the Correct Client: We believe the benefits of a client-sponsored project outweigh the negatives. Finding a client committed to continuous involvement is critical. In our experience the interaction of the client and students contributes greatly to the students' sense of ownership of and commitment to the project. This is particularly important at key milestones in the project such as presentation of research results and the actual promotional event.

Additionally, clients must be able to see the value of

a multistage approach to solving their problem. As described above, the client can serve as the key “live” link between the courses (assuming different instructors for each course). Good client candidates understand the time constraints of the academic calendar and may include various university services (health service, student life, food services, etc.), AMA student chapters or other student organizations, and not-for-profits to name a few.

Maintaining Individual Class Integrity: Because we cannot guarantee our students will take the Marketing Research class and the IMC class in sequence during each Fall and Spring semester, we need to ensure the individual courses (and their associated projects) stand alone. We achieved this by compartmentalizing the project so each class essentially had a stand-alone project. In the Marketing Research course, the preliminary research necessary for the project was supplemented with a few research questions of interest to the client apart from the promotional event. This course culminated with presentation of research findings to the client. Even those students not moving on to the IMC course had the benefit of conducting a client-sponsored research project as is common for many Marketing Research courses.

Since some of the IMC students would not have the benefit of first participating in the Marketing Research course, the IMC portion needed to function as a stand-alone project as well. This was achieved via delivery of research findings from the Marketing Research course and seeding project groups with students who had been in the Marketing Research course. As a result, students taking the IMC portion only received “background” on the project and went on to complete an IMC project consistent with a standard IMC course. In our focus group we asked if there were problems with the IMC-only students getting up to speed on the project. The perspective of students who took both classes indicated this was not a problem.

Faculty Involvement and Course Coordination: In our case, the courses were taught by different faculty so coordination was imperative. The first challenge is course scheduling. Working with our Department Chair and academic counselors we ensured the courses would be taught in a Fall/Spring sequence. We relied on the counselors to advise students to take the courses in this sequence since this is not currently a requirement.

Prior to the beginning of the fall semester, both instructors met with each other to discuss compartmentalizing the project and met with the client to establish objectives and expectations. The client meetings were critical to breaking the project into components that would meet the stand-alone needs of each course. The IMC instructor attended the research presentations and the Marketing Research instructor attended the IMC event. Following the project the instructors conducted the focus group and discussed lessons learned and ideas for future efforts.

Integrating Mechanisms: Arguably, this is the most important lesson learned. We have found several methods and mechanisms that can help tie the course content together. The goal is to help students see how concepts and techniques from one functional area of marketing are linked to those from another functional area. Below is a list of integrating mechanisms along with a brief description. Some of these mechanisms we have used and some we would use in future iterations.

Reports: Students in the Marketing Research course created full research reports documenting the problem, research objectives, research design, exploratory research findings, survey development, sampling plans, findings and recommendations. These reports served as a written history of the first part of the project and were distributed to student groups in the IMC course.

Project Liaison: In our case, the representative from EdVenture Partners served as a liaison between the client and the instructor. Additionally, this representative attended several class sessions in both courses and served as a “live” link between the courses. Recognizing that most schools may not work with EdVenture Partners, we suggest the use of a student intern with the client during the project if possible.

Client: The client also serves as a “live” link between the courses; this role can complement or substitute for a project liaison. As discussed earlier, careful choice of a client helps ensure that the client will be able to fulfill the integrator role by participating in both courses.

Students: The students who took both classes also served as “live” links. They brought their knowledge of the first part of the project to the student groups performing the second part of the project. Since the IMC course consisted of some students who had not taken the Marketing Research class, groups were constructed to contain a mix of both types of student. Students from the Marketing Research course were able to share the information obtained in the first part of the project and provide context for the information in the research reports.

Instructors: If one instructor were to teach both courses, said instructor could serve as a linking mechanism. In our case the courses were taught by separate instructors. Accordingly, we worked together to coordinate the project across the two courses. One recommendation we offer is to have the first instructor give a presentation in the second course outlining what work was done and why. The goal is to provide context for the research reports incorporation into the second part of the project.

Assignments: While we did not take full advantage of this mechanism, tying assignments between the courses should also serve as a linking tool. There were a few questions in the survey research that allowed comparisons pre and post-event. In particular, the students (Marketing Research) measured awareness of the client prior to the promotional event and again (IMC students) after the event and reported the difference. In future iterations we

would add more pre and post measures to directly demonstrate linkages.

LIMITATIONS

While we believe our method did help students more clearly see linkages between functional areas within marketing, we recognize there are considerable challenges associated with this approach. As alluded to in our “Lessons Learned” section, finding an appropriate project and client can be difficult. This approach also requires coordination between instructors although not at the level of team teaching. While we coordinated considerably, more effort could have been devoted to formalizing integration of concepts between courses. In future efforts we would each make project-related presentations in the other’s course. The IMC instructor would discuss the role of marketing research in IMC decision making (during the Marketing Research course) and the Marketing Research instructor would discuss the findings from the research project in the IMC course. We would create more assignments that directly tie course material together. Finally, we would improve our assessment of learning outcomes. As noted previously, our findings from a focus group and course evaluations indicate some effectiveness of the approach but more rigorous assessment could help determine if this is the best available method to achieve the desired outcome.

CONCLUSION

As marketing instructors, we strive to lay a foundation of marketing knowledge, strategies and tactics to help students develop into successful practitioners. However, we often see students struggling to see the “big picture” of marketing. The nature of the typical marketing curriculum isn’t much help as marketing content is broken into discrete chunks. Most programs utilize a capstone class to tie material together, but more often than not this represents the only time students see definitive linkages among marketing courses.

Our approach is designed to build structural ties between marketing courses, providing students with knowledge, and results from one class as ingredients for a project in a related class. Compared to other integration methods that operate within a single semester, our approach allows students to participate in the project via multiple roles. While we focused on linking marketing research with IMC, this approach could be adopted for many marketing course sequences such as marketing research and product management, marketing research and sales management, product management and personal selling, sales management, or IMC. The key is the explicit linking of knowledge and student generated data from one course in the conduct of the second course. Overall, while coordinating this approach was challenging, it achieved our goals of helping students integrate concepts across two marketing courses.

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