

A Case Study of Teaching Integrated Marketing Communication Using an Innovative Group Internship Project

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The author acknowledges the financial support from Indiana University Northwest Research Support Grant and the Byron Root Foundation. He acknowledges the assistance of Aishariya Bandyopadhyay in background research. The author also thanks his students enrolled in his Consumer Behavior class who participated in the Chevrolet project. Finally, the author gratefully acknowledges the support of the management of Mike Anderson Chevrolet dealership and EdVenture Partners.

Abstract

In recent years, many college campuses have moved to implement experiential learning projects in many disciplines. It is generally accepted that experiential learning projects or client projects (we will be using these two terms interchangeably throughout the paper) help students to communicate effectively, perform well in teams, solve problems, and acquire functional knowledge. We describe our experience of implementing an innovative experiential learning project that required students to form a company, and plan and execute an integrated marketing communication (IMC) plan for a real-life company on a tight budget. Finally, we compare the student assessment for this group internship project with traditional client projects that typically do not involve a full-fledged execution of an IMC plan.

Key words: Group internship, teaching integrated marketing communication; teaching advertising.

Introduction

In recent years, many college campuses have moved to implement experiential learning projects in many disciplines. It is generally accepted that experiential learning projects or client projects (we will be using these two terms interchangeably throughout the paper) help students to communicate effectively, perform well in teams, solve problems, and acquire functional knowledge (Parsons and Lepkowska-White 2009). These benefits are critical to succeed in a business environment. Hence many business schools have incorporated experiential learning projects in their curriculum (Gaumer, Cotleur and Arnone 2012, Bove and Davies 2009). However, effective implementation of an experiential learning project requires that the project is not too complex, can be completed within a reasonable time, and is interesting yet challenging to students (McCale 2008).

Description of the Problem

In my undergraduate Consumer Behavior class, I have incorporated a major group project wherein student groups develop an Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) plan for a number of local clients who need help in developing an implementable IMC plan. Each group is assigned to one client. Students interact with their designated client to learn about their products or services, target markets, and current promotional strategies. Traditionally, we select the clients who have a tangible marketing communication challenge, are willing to interact with student groups on a regular basis, and agree to attend the final presentation by the student groups. For last several years, this system has worked reasonably well in giving students the opportunity to work on a real-life project. However, these client projects have their share of limitations as well. I have outlined below a few of the key limitations:

1. Despite their commitment to regular contacts with students, several clients fail to interact with students on a regular basis. This can happen for a number of reasons. The contact persons may get busy with important assignments, may be on tour for a prolonged period, or simply lose interest in the project.
2. The final recommendations by the student group are not implemented regularly, in full or in part. As a result, the project becomes simply an academic exercise, which defeats the very purpose of the project.
3. Student groups generally focus simply on developing an IMC plan and developing a few communication tools (such as print ads, flyers, posters etc.) and hardly get any chance to implement the plan. As a result, they do not get the opportunity to demonstrate critical managerial skills such as project management, leadership, teamwork, interpersonal communication etc.
4. Most student projects do not involve actual implementation hence no budgeting and accounting are involved.

I believe the limitations outlined above leave a significant gap in the learning experience of our students. Thus I have been looking for a new experiential learning model that address these limitations.

Background of the Innovation

Because of the problem outlined above, I explored opportunities to design a project that involves a client who is in need of a real marketing communication campaign for its products or services. I got in touch with an educational consulting company, EdVenture Partners (<http://www.edventurepartners.com/>). In collaboration with EdVenture Partners, I developed an appropriate project that addressed the limitations mentioned above. This arrangement (henceforth called *Group Internship Project*) works well when the target market consists of young people in the age group of 18-24. Table 1 outlines the key differences between the group internship project and the traditional client project. It offers the students the opportunity to form an agency, plan and execute a real marketing campaign. Finally, we needed to identify a partner company who wanted to plan and implement an IMC campaign. We short listed 5 companies as potential partners, and finally selected Mike Anderson Chevrolet, the largest selling Chevrolet dealer in Indiana. We wanted to select a company that (1) has a national reputation, (2) has a strong presence in Northwest Indiana, and (3) was planning to execute an IMC plan during the semester when the course was offered. Mike Anderson Chevrolet satisfied all these criteria better than other alternatives. They agreed to work with us to develop a marketing campaign for four Chevrolet brands: *Sonic*, *Spark*, *Cruze* and *Camero*. Specifically, their business objectives were three-fold:

1. Increase awareness and consideration of featured models
2. Improve awareness and overall perception of Mike Anderson Chevrolet
3. Inform the target market of the Chevy College Discount Program

Mike Anderson Chevrolet expected two deliverables from this group internship project: (1) organize a promotional event at the campus where all four featured automobile models are to be showcased, take pictures and videos of the promotional activities, record the reactions of participants, and (2) conduct pre-campaign and post-campaign surveys to ascertain changes, if any, in target market's opinion about their brands.

Description of the Innovation

This innovation called for students in a marketing class to develop and implement an integrated marketing communication campaign for Mike Anderson Chevrolet located in Merrillville, Indiana. The program was designed to train students in the basics of a marketing campaign including marketing research, leadership, teamwork, client relations, oral and written communication, project management, and organizational skills. Students managed the marketing agency independently. As the instructor, I did not get directly involved in the planning and execution of the project. Before the planning process began, students had to create an agency, form the departments, and deploy individuals in each department.

Creation of the Marketing Agency

Creating a marketing agency involved a number of important steps. Students started with selecting a name for the agency. I helped them conduct an opinion survey to select the name. The most popular name, *Redhawk*

Marketing Company, was chosen as the agency name. All athletic teams at the university played under the banner of Redhawk. Thus it was expected to help students, the target market of the client, to identify with the company. Once the agency name was finalized, agency departments were formed and students were assigned responsibilities. Six departments were formed: research, campaign strategy and implementation, public relations, advertising, finance, and reports & presentations.

I polled students to find out their preferences for a department and willingness to serve as a chair of a department or serve as one of the two the agency coordinators. Students were asked to choose at least two departments to serve. This was done to give each student an opportunity to learn at least two sets of skills. The agency coordinator positions were critical because they had to coordinate with the sponsoring agency EdVenture Partners, the client Mike Anderson Chevrolet, manage interpersonal communication, facilitate meetings, and coordinate with the university Facilities Department to organize a promotional event at the campus. Four students applied for the agency coordinator position. After careful consideration, I selected one student who ran his own lawn care company, and another student who was an executive member of the campus student organization.

Functions of Various Departments

Research Department

The research department was responsible for designing a research plan to help the agency formulate a marketing strategy. In particular, it ran a pre-event survey to understand the attitudes and beliefs of the target market about the four featured models. The team analyzed the data and reported the results to the entire group. During the promotional event, the research team conducted another survey to ascertain the change in attitude, if any, of participants at the event.

Campaign Strategy & Implementation Department

Members of this department were responsible for formulating and implementing the marketing strategy. This department is principally involved in planning and executing the promotional event. As a result, there were responsible for coordinating with and securing necessary permits from university departments, coordinating with Mike Anderson Chevrolet, and coordinating with all departments to get their members involved in organizing the promotional event.

Public Relations Department

The public relations department was responsible for all publicity related activities including media coverage, press releases, news clips etc. They also coordinated efforts with University's Marketing and Communication department to generate media interest in the promotional event at the campus.

Advertising Department

Members of this department were responsible for planning and executing the entire advertising campaign. They planned and developed both traditional and nontraditional advertising tactics including print ads, flyers, posters, yard signs etc. Print ads were placed in local newspapers, student newspapers and newsletters. In addition, they created a new Facebook page to publicize the event.

Finance Department

The finance department was led by a budget coordinator. Students were given \$3,000 to execute the entire project. The budget coordinator was responsible to manage the fund. Specifically, he was responsible for opening a bank account, developing a budget, writing checks and collecting all receipts from all other members. Finally, members of this department prepared the Statement of Account for the client.

Presentations and Reports Department

Members of this department were responsible for preparing the final report and the presentation slides. They coordinated with all other departments to get their sections and incorporated them in the final report. They also selected the presenters, in coordination with the agency coordinators.

Details of the Promotional Event

Students organized a planned promotional event for four featured Chevrolet brands at the campus. All four brands were on display. Students prepared flyers, street signs, and yard signs. They created a special Facebook page to advertise the event (please visit <https://www.facebook.com/RedhawkMarketingCompany> for more details about the promotional event). They encouraged participants to complete a survey. In total, 498 people completed the survey after reviewing all four featured automobile models. They were offered giveaways (e.g., car air fresheners and tire gauzes), free pizzas and soft drinks for their feedback. Pre- and at-event surveys revealed a 19% increase (10% vs. 29%) in awareness of the Chevrolet Student Discount Program.

Finally, students made a presentation to the instructor, executives of Mike Anderson Chevrolet and members of the local media. The Sales Manager Al Kutcher of Mike Anderson Chevrolet expressed deep

satisfaction with the overall performance of the team. In his interview with a local newspaper Northwest Indiana Times, he mentioned that students did “a wonderful job” in creating interest about the event. (Please visit http://www.nwitimes.com/news/local/lake/gary/iun-students-put-marketing-strategy-to-work/article_bfc6d5c7-bacf-5388-93d3-a937f9d8acce.html for details about the news brief.)

Adaptability of the Group Internship Project to other Marketing Courses

The group internship project involves many business functions including research, advertising, public relation, budgeting, and project execution. While I incorporated group internship for an integrated marketing communication project in my Consumer Behavior class, it is easily applicable to many other marketing and business courses, including marketing strategy, business strategy, advertising & sales promotion, and project management.

Effectiveness of the Innovation

We used multiple assessment tools to measure the effectiveness of the group internship project. First, we compared the student evaluation scores for two consecutive years (2011 and 2012) of the Consumer Behavior class. We used traditional client projects in 2011 and the group internship project in 2012. The class design and class content were identical except the type of client project. Results are outlined in Table 2. We also noted the written comments of the students to get a sense of their opinion about the experience. Finally, we evaluated the comments of the representative of Mike Anderson Chevrolet made during the oral presentation.

Table 2 compares the student ratings of a few critical questions relevant to the client projects from 2011 and 2012. Results are presented in percentages. The percent ratings include only ratings of Strongly Agree (SA) and Agree (A). Thus, 92.85% rating for the question “Overall, I would rate the quality of this course as excellent” means that 92.85% of respondents either “strongly agree” or “agree” with the statement.

As mentioned earlier, client projects in 2011 involved a number of small businesses (both for-profit and non-profit) while that in 2012 featured the group internship project involving EdVenture and Mike Anderson Chevrolet. It is evident from Table 2 that students rated the “quality of the course” better (100% vs. 92.85%) and found the project “more challenging” (95.12% vs. 92%) when it involved the group internship rather than the traditional client project. Interestingly, students also found “the quality of the instructor” better (94.12% vs. 92.86%) when the course involved the Chevrolet project. Since the sample size for both years was small, the statistical significance test would yield unreliable results. Hence they are not reported in Table 2.

The written comments of students on the Chevrolet project were generally positive. A few of the comments were “great class”, “the Chevrolet Project was cool”, and “it was fun working with others on the same project”. We also received a few comments such as “wish everybody pulled their weights” and “difficult to organize meeting with group members with different schedule”. Since these comments are optional and only a few students responded, we unfortunately do not have a large set of comments. This precluded us from making an accurate judgment of student opinion.

Lessons Learnt

As an instructor, I learnt many important lessons from this project. First of all, it is difficult to get a large number of students (in our case 17 students) to work smoothly on a single project. Chances of friction between students are quite probable in such a situation. They did happen. Most of the issues though were minor, and the Department Chairs were able to manage them without my intervention. Second, the level of motivation varied from one student to another, thus the potential of dysfunctional departments was present. Since students chose to serve on a given department rather than getting assigned to it, we did not have a thoroughly demotivated student in any department.

The selection of two agency coordinators was very critical. As mentioned earlier, I selected a student who ran a lawn care company and another student who was an officer of the university student government. I selected the first student because of his experience in delegating tasks to others, managing employees, and handling money. I also appointed him as the Budget Coordinator. I selected the second student because he knew the key officials at the University Facility Planning who issued the permits to stage the promotional event at the campus. Fortunately, both selections worked very well. The agency coordinators executed their tasks with aplomb. I did not receive a single complaint against them from any other student, university officials or the representatives of Mike Anderson Chevrolet and EdVenture Partners.

Concluding Comments

As an instructor, it takes a lot effort to organize a group internship program like the Chevrolet promotion program. One may argue that the time spent in developing and implementing this project may be better spent in research which is generally more rewarded by the administration. My experience with this project, however, was very satisfying. It was evident that students learned a great deal from this project. On my part, I enjoyed working closely with the students, and representatives of EdVenture Partners and Mike Anderson Chevrolet. I felt that I made a significant contribution to student learning. That is precisely the reason I will not hesitate in implementing similar group internship projects in my marketing classes in future. It is my hope that my colleagues not only in my university but also in other universities will try this innovative teaching method to enhance student learning.

Table 1: A Comparison of Traditional Client Project and Group Internship Project

Criteria	Traditional Client Project	Group internship project
Group Size	Small (2-6 students)	Large (15-20 students)
Opportunity to implement project	Limited	Extensive
Scope of work	Mostly planning and strategy	Planning, strategy and implementation
Exposure to different marketing functions	Limited	Extensive
Exposure to different business functions	Limited	Extensive
Potential of soft skill development (leadership, team work etc.)	Limited	Extensive
Opportunity to work on a budget	Limited	Extensive

Table 2: Comparison of Student Ratings between Traditional Client Project and Group Internship Project

Survey Question	Traditional Client Project 2011		Group Internship Project 2012	
	N	Rating (%)	N	Rating (%)
Overall, I would rate the quality of this course as excellent	14	92.85	17	100
The course has received more of my time and effort than most other courses at this level	14	76.92	17	75
The final project challenged me a great deal	14	92.00	17	95.12
Overall, I would rate the quality of this instructor as excellent	14	92.86	17	94.12

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