

**Developments in Business Simulation and Experiential Learning, Volume 25, 1998**  
**MARKETING GOES TO THE MOVIES: AN EXPERIENTIAL CLASSROOM EXERCISE TO**  
**STIMULATE AWARENESS AND INTEREST IN PRODUCT PLACEMENT AS A**  
**MARKETING STRATEGY**

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**ABSTRACT**

By showing students movie clips that feature specific brands (a promotional strategy known as *product placement*), this classroom exercise has been an excellent vehicle for stimulating students' interest in marketing. Students are asked to write down all of the brands that they notice in the movie clips. Although many of the students have already seen some of the movies, such as "Happy Gilmore", typically they were not previously aware of all of the brands featured in each film.

**INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of this presentation is to describe an in class method that I have found to be a useful way of enhancing students' understanding of product placement as a marketing strategy. The following exercise has two primary objectives: (1) To stimulate undergraduate students' interest in marketing, and (2) To encourage students to view the discipline of marketing in broader terms than they did before taking the class. The exercise lasts approximately 50 minutes, including the short clips of movies that will be shown. For the purposes of the ABSEL conference, the activity will be shortened to 20-25 minutes.

**Part I: Brainstorming**

To begin the activity, I ask students to brainstorm for 7-10 minutes and write down a list of all of the ways that companies/brands go about promoting their products and services to customers. Invariably, students' lists are comprised of different types of advertising such as network and cable television, radio, print media, direct mail, event sponsorship, sales promotions such as

"Pepsi Stuff", etc. Surprisingly, although many of the students later reveal that they are movie enthusiasts, they rarely mention product placement as a form of marketing.

I suggest to students that the fact that they failed to mention product placement as a form of promotion is exactly what makes it such a desirable strategy for marketers. Because it is much more subtle than traditional advertising, movie goers don't tend to view it as marketing, and subsequently, they don't tune it out the way they often do ads (Baker and Crawford 1996; Dawley, Kuntz, and Weber 1996).

**Part II: Movie Viewing**

For the next segment of the exercise, I show students a short collection of actual movie clips from the following movies: "The Blues Brothers", "Risky Business", "Independence Day", and "Happy Gilmore". I ask them to write down all of the specific brands that they notice in the clips. This is usually a very enjoyable activity for the students, particularly near the middle or toward the end of the course when they are beginning to feel the inevitable pressure of the semester. The interesting thing about this activity is that although many students have already seen some of the movies, they are usually surprised at the number of brands they noticed after becoming aware of product placement as a marketing strategy.

**Part III: Discussion**

The next part of the exercise is an interactive discussion of product placement, including its advantages and disadvantages over traditional

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media advertising. I conclude with a brief discussion of ethical concerns that some individuals have voiced concerning product placement.

Perhaps the biggest advantage of product placement is that movie audiences are much more captive than television audiences. Whereas many television viewers tune out commercials or “channel surf” during ads, they are usually more attentive during movies (Dawley, Kuntz, and Weber 1996). In addition, if viewers can identify with characters in the movie, they may develop positive feelings towards the brands that these characters use.

Product placement is not without its risks, however. A case involving Reebok and the movie “Jerry Maguire” highlights one of the dangers of the strategy. Apparently, Reebok entered into an agreement with Tristar Pictures in which the footwear giant would be cast in a favorable light near the end of the movie. Unfortunately, this scene was cut from the movie and Reebok filed a multimillion dollar lawsuit against Tristar (Elliott 1997a).

Before wrapping up the exercise, I ask students one final question to ponder: “Do you have any ethical concerns with this strategy?” Usually, at least one student compares product placement to subliminal advertising, in which consumers don’t realize that they are being marketed to. Indeed, the line between advertising and entertainment is becoming increasingly thin, and there is some speculation that this trend is potentially deceptive to consumers.

In summary, the classroom exercise discussed in this paper is both entertaining and informative for the students. It allows them to see the wide scope of activities available to marketers. It also helps generate interest in marketing as a discipline, as many students are already movie lovers, and were previously unaware of product placement as a marketing strategy. At the end of the semester one student paid me the ultimate compliment by saying, in jest, “Thanks to this class, I can no longer enjoy going to the movies, because I’m too busy looking for product placement!”

### References

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