

# Developments In Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 19, 1992

## THE USE OF POSTER PRESENTATIONS AS A FINAL PROJECT IN THE BUSINESS POLICY COURSE

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to describe the use of posters as a final student project in the business policy course. To provide the reader with background the paper first presents some general information about the business policy course. Second the use of posters in other fields is discussed. Third, the business policy course in which the posters have been used is described. Fourth, specific information regarding the posters is presented along with the institutional context, which supports this type of activity. Finally, some of the experiences with the posters, including benefits and problems are offered.

### BACKGROUND ABOUT THE BUSINESS POLICY COURSE

In 1959 two major reports (Gordon and Howell, 1959; and Pierson, 1959) were published which changed the nature of business programs throughout the United States. Among the changes suggested in the reports colleges and universities were called upon to develop a capstone course for business majors. Most business schools responded to this call by developing a course in business policy whose primary purpose was to have students look at the total organization and integrate the various functional areas of the business. In most instances schools adopted the case method as the pedagogy for this course since cases had been used for a number of years to teach various aspects of business (McNair and Hersum, 1954). Beginning in the 1960's, however, another pedagogy, the business game, become available to serve the capstone course. While the relative merits of the case and simulation pedagogy remains a matter of some debate it appears that today both pedagogy are used quite frequently. More information about computerized business games can be found in the Guide to Business Gaming and Experiential Learning (Gentry, 1990) which contains article dealing with many aspects of experiential learning including the use of business games (Faria, 1990) and their history and teaching efficacy (Wolfe, 1990).

### POSTER PRESENTATIONS IN GENERAL

Concurrent with but unrelated to the rise of business games a number of disciplines, particularly the physical sciences, began to use a poster presentation format at professional meetings. With this approach a researcher/author prepares a poster containing verbiage and graphical information about the nature of the research. Typically, the researcher develops an abstract which people can pick up as they stop by the poster. If an individual is interested in the topic and wants more information the researcher is available to discuss the work.

From discussions with colleagues it appears that the approach was first used by the physical sciences and that they may have developed the idea based upon student science fairs. Other disciplines, most notably psychology, followed suit and posters became an acceptable, and in some groups, a preferred method of presentation at professional meetings. It appears that these professional groups saw at least three distinct advantages to this method of presentation as opposed to the method of having an

individual "read his/her paper to a group as part of a paper session. First, it let people identify topics in which they were interested and then talk directly to the author about the methodology employed results, etc. Second, it meant that researchers were talking only with people who were directly interested in what they had done. Third poster presentations were more efficient since you no longer had a room of people listening to three papers when they each had come to hear only one. Finally, it provided an opportunity to have more "presentations" on the program.

### THE AUTHOR'S BUSINESS POLICY COURSE

The author uses both cases and a business simulation in the business policy course. The cases used are similar to those available through the Harvard Case Clearinghouse or published in case books such as Byars (1987); Certo and Peters (1991); Pearce and Robinson (1991); and Thompson and Strickland (1990). The simulation used is Micromatic: A Management Simulation (Scott and Strickland, 1985). This simulation is moderately complex and well balanced across the business functional areas (Gomolka, Ward, and Parrot 1982). It requires students to make about 50 decisions per decision period each of which represents a quarter of a year of business operation. During the semester students make 12 set of decisions which simulates three years of running the company.

The students make the decisions as part of a team. At the beginning of the semester the students are permitted to create their own three-person teams. Four-person teams are permitted if the number of students in the class is not divisible by three. The students as part of their team work together on their decisions, reports, and presentations.

Prior to making their first set of decisions the students prepare a strategy report in which they set forth their basic philosophy, mission, goals, objectives and plans. After each simulated year the students prepare a management report which describes what they set out to accomplish, what happened (including their analysis of the environment), and what they plan to do in the future. These reports are reviewed by the instructor and by each firm's "board of directors" which is comprised of faculty and business executives. To provide a basis for comparison each board member serves on two boards.

The students also are required to make a presentation to their board of directors after each simulated year. For the first two of these meetings the students make a formal presentation after which the board members ask them questions. For the final meeting the students are required to prepare a poster showing what they set out to accomplish, successes and failures they experienced, and future directions.

### THE AUTHOR'S USE OF POSTER PRESENTATIONS

Before discussing the poster presentations as they are used in the business policy course it may be useful to provide some institutional context. For

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more than ten years the college's fine arts department has held a senior art thesis each spring. At the thesis the seniors present their work and are available to discuss it. In essence each student has a "showing" of his/her work just as professionals in the field do.

About seven years ago, a number of individuals at the college, noting the success of the art thesis presentations, proposed that the seniors in each department do a senior project which would involve some public presentation of their work. The first department to adopt this suggestion was the biology department, which used the poster presentation model from its professional meetings as the way for their seniors to present their research. The next department to introduce the senior project along with a poster presentation was psychology. Again, this discipline was drawing upon a presentation format, which was widely accepted among those in the profession. In the case of both biology and psychology the students have an abstract of their work to hand out and they are available to discuss their research. Over the years these departments have turned the senior project presentations into an event which attracts members of the entire college community (students, faculty, administrators, and staff), friends, alumni, spouses, children, parents, employers, and others from the community at large.

More recently the physical therapy department, which offers the master's degree only, and the business administration and economics department have begun to follow practices similar to art, biology and psychology. Other departments are also now adding this type of public presentation to their programs so they are becoming a college-wide event. The extent of the adoption is shown by the fact that last year the fine arts department under the direction of the associate dean of the college conducted a workshop on poster preparation for all seniors. As part of this workshop the department distributed a resource booklet assembled to help non-art majors with their poster presentations.

In the business administration area we decided that the business policy course constituted a senior project since it requires students to pull together all their areas of study. We decided that this course also offered the opportunity for students to do public presentations involving posters since they could summarize their performance in the simulation. The poster presentations take place as part of the last meeting with the board of directors. The students meet with their board for about 10 minutes then the board members visit with other teams so they have an opportunity to see how all the teams performed. After about 30 minutes the doors to the room are opened and anyone is free to attend and talk to the students, the instructor, and the board members.

The students' posters set forth what they set out to accomplish, successes and failures, and future directions. Typically, they include some verbiage as well as graphic presentation of material. The Instructor also prepares a poster, which describes the nature of the environment the students were facing over the three years of simulated operations. A photocopy of one of the posters developed by a team of students is presented as the last page of this article. This photocopy indicates the type of information the students typically include. The layout of this information in the photocopy has been modified from the original poster, which was 28 inches by 44 inches in order to have it fit on an 8 and 1/2 inch by 11-inch page unfortunately, a photocopy of this type loses the richness of the materials, graphics, colors, and artistic creativity employed by the students. To try to capture some of these aspects we have had

the art department make color slides to preserve the students work in a better fashion.

### EXPERIENCES WITH THE POSTER PRESENTATIONS

We have now used the poster presentation approach for three years. We have had some good results and some not so good. We have learned some things, which work and some things which need to be better managed. On balance, however, the poster presentations have been valuable in a variety of ways. First, they have brought recognition to the students and the department from many outside the department. The president of the college, chief administrative officers, department chairs, faculty, and students from many disciplines, business executives, as well as, friends, spouses, children, and parents of the students have attended the presentations. Second, they have forced the students to focus on what information they need to provide the two very diverse audiences who will view the posters. As can be seen from the above list the people stopping by will range from corporate presidents who have participated on the boards to individuals who are relatively naive about business operations. Third, they have helped students who will be taking the course in the future gain information about the course requirements and expectations prior to taking the course. Fourth, they have fostered inter-departmental cooperation among the students of the college. Thus, in the most recent year some of the teams hired students from the art department to help them with the artistic aspects of their posters. In light of these developments we hope to have more formal connections between the departments in the future. Finally, the poster presentations have given the student experience in what they may be called upon to do in the "real world as they do presentations. They clearly have begun to explore on their own the use of Harvard Graphics and other software to aid them in their presentations

Not all has gone well, however, and we know of four major problems over the years. First, in our second year we chose the college theater for the presentations because of the space it provided and because it was right across from the art thesis so we would get movement between the two departments since we were holding our sessions on the same evening. The room was checked out one day and everything seemed to be fine, however, our presentation time was at night and with no natural lighting coming in the windows the lighting was inadequate. Second, we initially assigned very little weight to the posters in terms of the final grade. Consequently, the student team, which performed best in the simulation and also had the best reports and presentations to its board of directors decided to put very little effort into their poster. Thus, we had a poster on public display, which was of poor quality. These students did "earn a lesson, however, when they saw the quality of their poster compared to the others. They were embarrassed and they merely hung up their poster and walked to a distant area in the room so they would not be seen with their work. This lesson was not lost on those who did quality posters. Third, over the years the quality of the posters has improved but the materials do not seem to hold up as well. In the most recent year the day after the presentations the graphics materials fell off the posters of two of the teams. Thus, it has become necessary to make photographs of the posters in order to have a record on file. Fourth, the posters are

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becoming a competition in and of themselves and the cost to the students in real dollars is getting quite high. Last year for example, a number of teams spent over \$60 dollars on the materials for their posters. Improved quality also has had an impact real on the instructor who also prepares a poster. In the first year the instructor's poster was in the top 25% but by the second year using exactly the same format it had slipped to the bottom 25%. In the most recent year it was in the top 10% but the materials and the fee to the art major who did the poster was \$75. In addition, since the instructor now has someone else with whom he must work (the art student) the lead-time for getting things completed has increased. Finally, we have discovered over the years that we must provide the students with specific information regarding the size of the posters and acceptable materials. We had one team, which produced an extremely large poster, which they had difficulty getting to the room for presentation. Another team did a four-foot by four-foot poster on particleboard, which was so heavy we were concerned about hanging it on the wall.

### CONCLUSION

Even with the problems cited above the use of poster presentations appears to be a valuable tool in the business policy course. The feedback from the students and others has been very positive. Clearly, however, we need to assess the long-term impact on our students in order to validate the usefulness of such an activity. We encouraged others to try this technique.

### REFERENCES

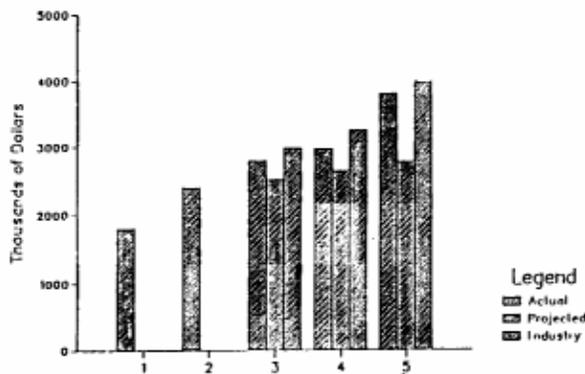
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BEECEE, INC.

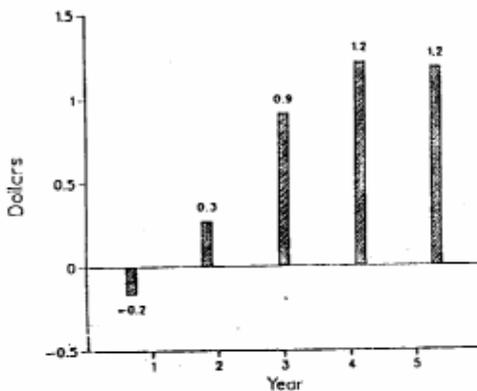
BEECEE, INC. STATEMENT OF STRATEGY/GOALS/OBJECTIVES

- Increase our Sales in Dollars by 5% a year over the next three years.
- Add 4,000 additional units of plant by the end of year four.
- Attain an increase in market share through intensifying of advertising and addition of sales representatives in areas two and three

Sales in Dollars



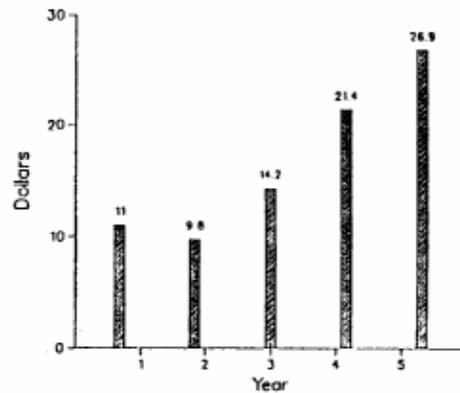
BeeCee, Inc. Earnings per Share



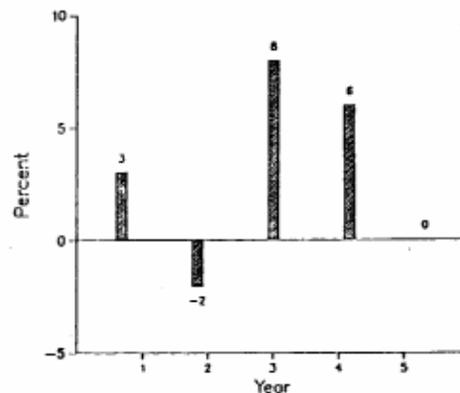
PERFORMANCE VARIABLES

Sales in Dollars	.4
Stock Price	.2
Earnings per Share	.2
Return on Equity	.2

BeeCee, Inc. Stock Price



BeeCee, Inc. Return on Equity



SUCCESSSES:

- Since new management took over we have shown a steady increase in net sales. We increased our net sales by 16% in year 3, 6.3% in year 4 and 20% in year 5.
- The value of our stock increased from \$9.76 to \$26.90 in year 5.
- Increased net income from a negative \$26,000 (year 2) to \$145,000 (year 3) to \$194,500 (year 4) and \$192,000 (year 5).

MISTAKES (PROBLEMS):

- Should have sold more units of plant capacity to obtain higher book value.
- Should have constructed more units in area 2.
- Reduced capacity to 80% first half of year 5, causing a stockout and forcing last half of year into overtime to prevent further loss of market share.

ENVIRONMENTAL INFLUENCES:

- Closing of Ft. Sticks had greatest impact. Advantage: Sales increased in area 2. Disadvantage: We did not add sufficient plant capacity in area 2 to cover increase in sales and reduce transportation costs.
- Industry price was higher than BeeCee, Inc. we should have raised the price.
- Two increases in wages were offset by purchase of technological equipment.