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PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITY REPORTS: GETTING BACK TO THE BASICS -- A PRELIMINARY EVALUATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an exploratory program of marketing education recently adopted at the University of Akron. "Professional Activity Reports" have been used in the Industrial Marketing and in the Sales Management courses during the past two years. The operation of this pedagogic tool is discussed and a preliminary evaluation of the program is presented in this report.

INTRODUCTION

Career preparation is a major responsibility of the collegiate business professor. Unlike many liberal arts disciplines, a professional business school must design courses and curriculums that will enable students to successfully: (1) compete in the entry-level job market, and (2) achieve long-run career advancement goals.

A continuing trend in the marketing marketplace is the fact that corporate recruiters often consider students from a variety of majors as being equally suitable for many marketing positions (e.g., chemistry majors for pharmaceutical sales). Marketing students are forced to compete with students from a variety of disciplines for the limited number of available "marketing" positions. Even a cursory scan of the educational requirements posted by many corporate recruiters indicates that degree candidates in marketing as well as "other majors" are encouraged to interview for many "marketing" positions. Furthermore, in several corporate marketing fields, many managers do not have academic degrees in marketing. This is especially true in industrial marketing where managers having degrees in the hard sciences tend to be very prevalent.

This notable presence of people working in marketing positions without academic preparation in marketing suggests that the marketing academic community has not yet devised a curriculum and pedagogy that enables marketing majors to be considered by corporate recruiters as the graduates who are uniquely qualified to assume marketing positions. While many marketing students do, in fact, go on to very successful business careers, many business organizations still do not consider a degree in marketing a necessary prerequisite for a successful career in marketing. Marketing academicians need to reconsider marketing curriculum and pedagogy in light of what employers need and want. In other words, we must practice the marketing concept.

There have been many studies of "what employers want's from prospective marketing employees [e.g., 1, 2, 3, 4]. While each study contributes in a different way to our understanding of executive interests, all of these studies are similar in terms of reporting the following conclusions.

First, executives indicate that the technical marketing expertise gained from formal coursework is of limited value. While a tax accountant needs to learn the tax laws and a brain surgeon needs to know the physiology of the human head before obtaining employment, corporate executives tend to place little emphasis on analogous technical information that a marketing student would gain from pursuing a marketing degree. Evidently, corporate executives do not consider a working knowledge of how to:

(1) identify target markets, (2) establish price points, (3) conduct a marketing audit, and (4) other technical marketing skills to be a necessary prerequisite for many entry-level marketing positions.

Second, the composite corporate viewpoint is that "marketing is a people business" and that highly successful marketers have exceptional people skills. Studies suggest that corporate recruiters seek prospective marketing employees who have: (1) excellent communication skills (written and oral), (2) outstanding interpersonal skills, and (3) a professional orientation to the marketing discipline.

These skills are best learned through involvement exercises with structured feedback. Unfortunately, the current operating conditions and expectations of many university environments does not lend itself to the use of pedagogies that develop the people skills cited above. Increased demands for greater productivity of labor and facilities has led to increased class sizes. Larger class enrollments necessitate, in most cases, the lecture method of instruction and the objective examination method of student evaluation. Neither of these is conducive to the development of the basic people skills deemed so important by corporate marketing recruiters.

THE AKRON EXPERIENCE

This paper describes an exploratory program in the Marketing Department at the University of Akron that incorporates the use of Professional Activity Reports as a key pedagogic component in meeting the Department's 1986 strategic planning goal of the enrichment of the learning environment and the improvement in instructional quality. Professional Activity Reports, which emphasize oral presentation and written communication, have been tested for two years in both the Industrial Marketing and Sales Management courses.

The problems of increasing productivity in light of an expanding enrollment had become a critical problem for the Marketing Department at the University of Akron. During the last four years, the department has experienced a 200 per cent increase in enrollment. Average class size for marketing electives increased from the lower-twenties to the mid-forties, while the Principles of Marketing classes surpassed the 300 student level. The result was predictable.

Most classes were being taught using the lecture method and objective tests as the primary form of evaluation. Departmental faculty were concerned that this very limited variety of pedagogy restricted their ability to provide the highest quality of education to the large number of very ambitious students served.

To overcome this problem, the department moved to an entirely new program of mega-and micro-classes. The Principles of Marketing, Advertising, and Buyer Behavior classes were offered in the mega-class (100 or more students) format using lectures and objective tests. This afforded the department an opportunity to reduce most other classes to 25 or fewer students and permit the incorporation of Professional Activity Reports as well as using a number of different formats.

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Formats for the Professional Activity Reports are currently being developed which emphasize different skills. Each format will emphasize some combination of the following: (1) analytical skills, (2) oral and written communications, (3) computer applications and data analysis, and (4) research skills.

It is anticipated that different Professional Activity Reports emphasizing particular skills will be assigned to different marketing electives. Individual professors assigned to those electives are expected to emphasize the development of those skills as well as content of that particular subject matter. Once the program is fully implemented, it will be virtually impossible for a student going through the marketing program not to be exposed at least once to each of the four basic skills via the various formats.

IMPLEMENTING PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITY REPORTS

The unique and most important feature of Professional Activity Reports is the "menu" format. In Sales Management and Industrial Marketing, students select from a list of five different activities and another category best described as "any other" which is approved by the instructor (see Appendix 1).

Professional Activity Reports can be written for any of the following projects:

- (1) attend a meeting of a relevant professional association,
- (2) conduct an interview with a professional working in the relevant field (i.e., industrial marketing or sales),
- (3) spend a day traveling with a sales person,
- (4) prepare a marketing analysis of a corporation,
- (5) write a summary of a relevant journal article,
- (6) any other approved activity.

Many instructors would like to require students to participate in a particular activity listed above. Unfortunately, there would be outcries of "unfair" and/or "too expensive" by some students if every student had to, for example, attend a meeting of a professional association. Some students do not have the transportation to attend the meeting and others are unwilling to pay the required expenses. By allowing students to choose from several different activities, however, this criticism is not present because no one is forced into any particular activity. At the same time, however, some students are adequately encouraged to engage in each of the desired activities from the "menu"

Furthermore, there may be certain professional liability advantages to the instructor from the menu approach. If a professor requires that each student attends a particular professional association meeting, there could be a professional liability to the instructor if a student is injured in the course of that required activity. If the student selects a particular activity, however, there was no "forced attendance" and the instructor may be less susceptible to litigation in the event of a tragedy.

Following a similar line of reasoning, at the University of Akron we do not identify the professionals who are willing to provide interviews or who would spend the day traveling with the student. There is also some benefit for the student in learning how to identify the professional, contacting that individual, and making the arrangements to meet. This is much like the first few stages of the personal selling process.

During the semester, each student is responsible for completing two Professional Activity Reports. The assignments must be written in good form and the student is allowed up to five minutes to present the report to the class. Often, there is some discussion by other class members. Approximately two to three hours of class time should be scheduled for a class of 25 students to present Professional Activity Reports. We have found it productive to schedule the first set of reports to be presented during the week after the second test and the second set of reports after the last test during the last week of class.

Most students enjoy the work necessary to complete the Professional Activity Reports. Also, most are motivated to do a good job because they want to avoid any embarrassment when they present the report to the class. Consequently, it is not necessary to assign extensive weight to the Professional Activity Reports in the grading procedures. We assign 15 points to each of the two reports in a 320 point grading system. Consequently, the Professional Activity Reports account for approximately ten percent of the grade for the course.

Finally, to maintain good relations with the business community, the instructor sends a thank you letter to each person who granted an interview or spent the working day with one of our students. This ensures that an acknowledgement of their involvement and assistance in our program is provided. All too often, students cannot be relied upon to issue this courtesy to the practitioners.

EVALUATING PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITY REPORTS

Advantages

Professional Activity Reports offer several advantages over traditional pedagogical approaches to marketing education. First and most importantly, this innovative approach develops the skills that corporate recruiters want. The students must prepare written and oral reports of the activities. Experience has shown that if the instructor demands good form and an excellent written presentation, it will be provided. Also, each student is "forced" to orally present the report to the class. A supportive and informal atmosphere is needed. If provided, the students make dramatic progress during the semester in becoming comfortable and at ease in speaking to the group.

These activities also encourage the development of interpersonal skills. Most of the Professional Activity Reports require the student to interact with others. Rather than passively listening to (or sleeping through) a lecture, they must seek out others and interact professionally with them.

These assignments also help develop a professional orientation among our students. They begin to think of themselves as young marketing professionals, rather than "just students". Attending a meeting of a professional association is particularly effective in developing this sense of belonging to the marketing discipline.

These assignments also provide a variety of other learning advantages over other pedagogies. For example, the assignment of interviewing professionals is very useful in grooming our students for their employment interviews as they approach graduation. The students become at ease talking to a person "wearing a

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tie" and transfer that confidence to the job inter-view. Many of our students have also been offered employment interview invitations upon the completion of the Professional Activity Report involvement with practitioners.

This activity also ensures some form of "real world exposure" for our students. They perceive the experience to be very practical and worthwhile. Further-more, they are almost always motivated by this "real world exposure" to more intensely pursue the scholarly aspect of the course because the executives interviewed support and confirm what has been previously studied in the text.

Professional Activity Reports may also help the student learn if marketing is a profession which he or she will enjoy. Even only one day spent traveling with a sales rep may be enough to confirm that sales is the profession of first choice! Obviously, this is also a very useful experience for the students who learn that they should redirect career goals. It is also motivational for students who become even more certain that working in marketing is how they want to spend their careers.

These activities can also have a very positive impact on the perception or image of the university in the business community. Many practitioners consider university activities to be too "ivory-towered" and theoretical. The Professional Activity Report, however, encourages the students to contact executives and asks a series of questions so that the student can learn about marketing from these practicing "experts". Most executives readily grant the interviews and, frankly, find it to be an ego-boosting experience. Furthermore, they realize that the university is not as "ivory-towered" as they had originally thought. When they later receive a very complementary and appreciative thank you letter, most executives develop greatly enhanced favorable impressions of the university. This will eventually result in further involvements, hiring of our marketing graduates, financial contributions, and perhaps even consulting assignments for the faculty member involved!

Another advantage to faculty members utilizing Professional Activity Reports may be improved instructor evaluations. While we have not tested this hypothesis scientifically, we suspect that students' positive reactions to these activities would be reflected in the course and instructor evaluations. Even if just the halo effect is present, the instructor is likely to receive generally higher ratings.

Disadvantages

Professional Activity Reports, as described in this paper, consume a lot of class time. We spend two of the fifteen weeks of the semester for these class presentations. We believe that the benefits justify the time but recognize, however, that the in-class presentations could not be made if class size exceeds 45-50 students.

Furthermore, the instructor should expect to spend considerable time explaining the projects to students in class and also in the office on a one-to-one basis. Grading the papers and writing the thank you letters also requires far more time than the traditional lecture approach.

Perhaps another disadvantage to Professional Activity Reports is the potential professional liability that these projects might entail. While we have not had any problems in this regard, any one considering implementation of the pedagogy is encouraged to thoroughly discuss the matter with your university's legal staff.

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