THE ADVERTISING AGENCY GAME AN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING EXERCISE

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ABSTRACT

The 'Advertising Agency game presented here was used with excellent results during two semesters in an undergraduate advertising course. The game pairs two groups of students competing to win the account of a "real' client who has agreed to play the game. The students learn what advertising is and how it interrelates to the other variables of marketing. Happy clients spread the word of their positive experience with the students, thus enhancing the university's reputation for preparing students.

INTRODUCTION

An advertising and promotions course is probably the most exiting area for conducting a game that provides hands on experience and gives students the opportunity to deal with a real world situation. What follows is a description of the 'Ad agency game" which was tested in the second semester of 1980-81, was redesigned to incorporate needed adjustments and then was repeated in the second semester of 1981-82. The experiment took place at the Mayaguez Campus of the University of Puerto Rico with undergraduate students in the advertising and promotions course.

The game took place mostly outside of normal classroom hours on the students' own time. Classroom time was devoted to more conventional teaching like class discussion of assigned text book chapters and analysis of questions and cases.

The objective of the ad agency game was three fold. In addition to allowing for a practical experience in developing and suggesting how to implement an advertising strategy for a client, the game provided the opportunity for preparing and executing an oral presentation to "sell" the client on the proposal. The third objective was to test knowledge of advertising by having each student act as a manager to evaluate the presentations made by the ad agencies.

METHODOLOGY

The following describes the roles of the "Ad Agency' and the client, and summarizes the procedures for the week-end session for oral presentations.

The "Ad Agency"

The class was divided into groups, each of which became an "ad agency". Two agencies were assigned to compete for the same account. This is the key to the game.

Even though there is not necessarily a winner or a loser, as the semester progresses the 'ad agencies" take the competition very seriously as a "winner takes all" mentality develops. This is the spice that flavors the course.

The "ad agency" has a chance to meet on its own to do some preliminary work regarding the client, his line of business, the competitive structure, etc. Then both agencies meet with the client at the client's place of business. There is only one meeting allowed, so both agencies should have done their basic research in order to make the most out of this meeting. The instructor is present at this meeting in order to understand what information the 'ad agencies" were given, how certain questions were answered, etc. A second meeting might be required, usually because the client was not ready for the avalanche of good questions posed by the 'ad agencies'. In the event a second meeting is needed (a decision reserved for the instructor), both ad agencies are present-even if only one of them made the request for the meeting. The idea is that both agencies start with the same opportunity for receiving information.

The rules of the game prohibit either agency from contacting any employee of the client without previous consent from the instructor. The idea is to prevent the client from receiving unneeded calls or visits for more data gathering. This burden gave the ad agencies a clear signal of the importance for being well prepared for that initial meeting with the client.

The client

Before the semester began, various "clients" were secured for the game. Their role in the exercise was clearly delineated: they would allow one initial meeting with the 'ad agencies to answer all questions; they would attend the presentations of the 'ad agencies". In return they would receive copies of each of the presentations which included proposed marketing objectives, advertising objectives, advertising strategy, media plan, etc. The first time it was hard to secure "clients." Today, previous clients call to let the instructor know of prospects and to volunteer to sell such prospects on the advantages of taking part in the exercise. Also, a copy of the written project or a look at a video tape of an "ad agency" making a presentation will get perspective clients enthused with the idea.

Oral Presentation

The highlight of the semester is the day when the oral presentations are made to the client. The presentations begin on a Friday evening and take most of the following day. Students and clients are given the date (usually two weeks prior to the end of the semester) on the first day of school since it is very important for everyone to be present.

All written projects are submitted two weeks before the oral presentations week-end. Then, classroom discussions follow about how to make presentations, use audiovisuals, and design an effective, short presentation. Those discussions provide the groups with the theory and the opportunity to design and practice good presentations. Otherwise, the experience is that if the written projects are submitted on the day of the oral presentation, the groups will be writing and typing until the eleventh hour with no time to devote to the oral presentation.

The oral presentation is given before the client, the

other ad agency and the rest of the class which acts as the management of the client and who must evaluate the campaigns presented. Students receive a grade for how well they evaluate other campaigns. Twenty minutes is the maximum time allowed for each presentation. After both presentations are finished, five minutes is granted for questions and answers, followed with ten minutes for an individual written evaluation of the presentations.

Neither the client nor the instructor have read the written project prior to the oral presentation in order to be more objective when evaluating the oral presentation per se.

After the written evaluations from the rest of the class are handed in, an impromptu discussion usually begins with a very happy client making a testimonial of how he volunteered to play the game thinking he was doing the students a favor and instead sees that the students did him a favor by doing such a fine analysis and presentation. This, of course, is a big reward in itself and the students are happy to see it was all worth the effort.

METHOD OF EVALUATION

This could become a pleasure or a nightmare, depending on how it is handled. First, the relative ranking of the overall course is important. The first grade is a group project (case study) assigned on the second day of school and due in two weeks. The feed-back from this project gives the students an idea of what is expected of them for the 'ad agency game.

New groups are formed afterwards, so that less willing workers, if there are any, are not attached to the same group all semester.

For the rest of the semester the ad agency group works together and produces the written project and the oral presentation. Every student in the class performs an individual written evaluation on the campaigns presented by the ad agencies.

Still, though, many complain that group work allows for some to take it easy while a few end up doing all the work. However, the competition syndrome generated by the groups themselves makes everyone work hard. Sure, there are some slower than others in the group and the instructor will receive visits from some group members discrediting others in their group. But the group itself should be left to handle its own problems. In this exercise, I do not recommend the technique previously reported [1,4] of allowing a member of a group to be fired and hired by other groups. When the students realize they are stuck with each other and that division is only going to help the other ad agency, they find a way of resolving their differences and working together.

The percent breakdown of the final grade is as follows:

First group project	10%

Ad agency project
  50% written report
  50% oral report
	50%

Individual evaluation of other presentations	40%
	100%

By allowing for the individual evaluation of other presentations to be 40% of the final grade, you are in fact balancing the grade of those who worked hard and learned but happened to be in a weak group, vis-à-vis those who took it easy (and didn't learn that much), but happened to be in a strong group.

It has been the instructor's experience that ad agencies end up learning more than their written project suggests because a lot of learning takes place after the project is handed in, the oral presentation is put together and the presentations are made. What I have done, with great results, is to grade their written project and make notes about its areas for improvement in a separate paper, then return the unmarked project back to the group. They have a week to meet on their own and evaluate the complete project with recommendations on how to improve it. Then, the instructor meets for approximately an hour with each group. Depending on how much the group points out it's own faults and how to correct them, the instructor awards extra points up to one full grade higher if all of the group's finding match the instructor's list for improvements. Note: Don't be surprised if the group's list of faults is twice as long as the instructor's.

This meeting for discussion of how it could have been done better is, in fact, an excellent debriefing, probably the only semi-formal debriefing session needed. In the case of the "ad agency" game J. Ronald Frazer's statement is most applicable: while some debriefing is necessary, we should always keep in mind that there are many things that students can work out for themselves and in so doing understand them far better than if we tell them what they are supposed to have learned. [2]

RESULTS

The experience with the 'ad agency' game fulfilled the prophecy that 'students recall 10% of what they read, 40% of what they write down, 70% of what they do and 80% of what they do in real-life application situations'. [3]

The results have been most stimulating. Students devoted a great amount of effort to the solution of a real-life advertising case not because of a grade, not because the instructor ordered them to do so, but because they wanted to present their best work to a real client. The game provided challenge, together with the glamour of advertising, the preoccupation of keeping their great ideas away from any possible spying of the other agency, the dilemma of deciding which alternative to present to the client. Then, to top it all off, the preparation and execution of a twenty minute presentation to win an account for which they had invested many hours of hard work.

Today, many clients get equally excited as the game progresses and have invited their real ad agencies to be present for the oral presentations and to participate in the discussion afterwards.

Class members invite relatives and friends for the big day of the oral presentations and alumni of the course make it a point to have an "ad agency" reunion the week-end of the oral presentations.

It really becomes a happening, and of course, most important of all-the learning objectives are met.

This game is just one idea that others might find use-

ful for the advertising course. It has been my intent to share it hoping some one might have a similar successful learning experience for his students.

REFERENCES

[1]   Beltramini, Richard F., "The Advertising Research Project as an Innovative Experiential Learning Technique," in David J. Fritzsche & Lee A. Graf (editors), Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 9, 1982, P. 47.

[2]   Frazer, J. Ronald, "Some Issues in Game Design," in Daniel C. Brenenstuhl and William D. Briggs (editors), Experiential Learning Enter the 80's, 1980, P. 186.

[3]   Richardson, Neil A., et. al., "The Problems of Motivating Students and Clients in Five-Case Projects," in Daniel C. Brenenstuhl and William D. Biggs (editors), Experiential Learning Enters the 80's 1980, P. 108.

[4]   Smiley, Bob, E., "Toward the Ultimate Experiential Exercise," in Daniel C. Brenenstuhl and William D. Biggs (editors), Experiential Learning Enters the 80's, 1980, p. 27.