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THE ADVERTISING RESEARCH PROJECT AS AN INNOVATIVE EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING TECHNIQUE

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ABSTRACT

Testing of an advertising research project within the context of a Marketing Intelligence course has provided an innovative experiential learning technique paralleling the business world. The project technique blends both theoretical issues and hands-on experience, and has been demonstrated successful from the perspectives of clients, students, and the university alike.

INTRODUCTION

Instructors of undergraduate advertising research courses are faced with the need to communicate the fundamentals of quantitative and qualitative methodologies, field data collection procedures, computer statistical analysis, and the oral and written presentation of research findings. Yet they are faced with minimal prerequisite knowledge, and an abundance of mathematical/computer anxiety among students entering the course. The task becomes one of offering hands-on experience, paralleling the business world as directly as possible, while pacing the content development appropriately given student preparation.

PHILOSOPHY/PEDAGOGY

To prepare students as both doers and consumers of advertising research, It is essential to analyze what types of research businesses are indeed involved in. Greenberg, Goldstucker, and Bellinger [3] found that "simpler techniques are the most widely used," and that "intensive study of those simple, albeit less sophisticated, techniques" will more adequately prepare business students to cope with practical research problems when entering the business world.

More specific to advertising, David Berger [2] recently noted the diversity of advertising research techniques commonly employed in major advertising agencies. A combination of the importance of simple approaches to diverse techniques further taxes the instructor of an advertising research course to develop an appropriate philosophical and pedagogical approach while "giving hands-on experience" [1].

Ideally, students should be exposed to all phases of the research process, in all types of research, for all types of clients, dealing with all types of consumers of all products and services. In practice of course this is not totally possible. However, the advertising research project discussed in this paper does provide a somewhat innovative answer to accomplishing the majority of the Idealistic objectives stated.

ADVERTISING RESEARCH PROJECT

For the past few years, the Marketing Department at Arizona State University has been testing and refining a research project concept among undergraduate students in each Marketing Intelligence course. Prior to the start of each semester,

instructors have engaged in extensive "promotional" mailings within the community to those organizations involved in research activities. The approach which has evolved has been to screen potential client/sponsors seeking those larger, well-known corporations and organizations in an effort to enhance student appeal, and provide the resources needed to ensure cooperation with the student research teams during the semester-long research project. This promotional and screening responsibility is extremely time-consuming, but seemingly offers students a far greater opportunity to learn advertising research techniques actually practiced in the real world, over requiring the students to secure project sponsors themselves.

The instructor screening permits students to be assigned to research client teams early in the semester, further ensuring the timely completion of a quality project. Instructors secure the financial and time cooperation of clients, and ascertain the probability of clients' future use of the research (i.e., true interest in sponsoring the project).

Class sections normally range from 30 to 40 students yielding approximately six teams of five plus students each. Experience has shown this permits greater division of labor and less conflicts than smaller groups, and less confusion than class-wide project teams. Students are given the opportunity to preference both clients and team members, although final determination of assignments is made by the instructor tempering student preferences with their geographic location, class and work schedules, and so forth.

MECHANICS

Following research team assignments, the students are encouraged to contact their client as soon as possible to schedule an on-site briefing session. While the instructor secures some abbreviated input on the nature of the clients problem or opportunity during the screening phase, minimal input is forwarded to student research teams. This has been found to enhance student motivation by funneling client input they themselves secure down to a workable project. The idea is to reduce the "slave labor" feeling of simply handing over the specific direction of the project to student teams, and requiring their compliance.

The research teams next return to campus to begin their background search. They are encouraged to exhaust all secondary sources of information prior to engaging in primary data collection. The intent is to develop their understanding of the current state of the client's industry, and learn what has been done in the past to provide an indication of what is needed in the future.

Next, the research proposal is prepared. Students incorporate their background search, the purpose and direction of the project, limitations and assumptions,

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and the proposed timetable and budget. Several preliminary drafts of the proposal are normally necessary to secure the instructor's signature, prior to submitting for the client's signature. Each student researcher also signs the final version of the proposal, and copies of the contractual agreement are distributed to all concerned parties. The proposal phase parallels the business world, necessitating many trade-offs between theoretically-based ideas and time and cost considerations.

A further practical parallel involves the General Personnel Pool. At any point during the semester, team members may be fired for unsatisfactory performance. Upon consensus of the research team, firing procedures are initiated. Both the team and the individual are permitted hearings with the instructor followed by a decision on the part of the latter on whether the individual should be placed in the General Personnel Pool. Fired individuals may be rehired by other research teams, may band together to form their own team, or may individually initiate their own project. While being fired does not impact directly on an individual's evaluation (i.e., grade), it does contribute to one's workload and responsibilities.

Upon final approval of the proposal (normally near mid-term), individuals submit peer evaluations, which the instructor utilizes with those submitted upon completion of the project, to assign individual grades. The midterm peer evaluation is particularly useful to identify potential problems before they magnify to detract from overall group performance.

Research teams assemble a data collection instrument designed to answer the issues proposed, and pretest its clarity both in the classroom and then under field conditions. Appropriate revisions are made, and the data collection phase initiated. It is especially important that all group members participate in all group research functions, particularly data collection. In the past, students have collected data via telephone, mail, and personal interview among housewives, the elderly, businessmen, and virtually every subsegment in the area. Sampling techniques are closely monitored and completed questionnaires verified to enhance the representativeness and quality of the data.

The data are next coded, and entered via CRT on the university computer facilities by the students. Individual research teams have their own accounts, and the instructor's account allows access to each to monitor their progress. The data entry phase of the project normally necessitates an extra class section to demonstrate the procedures employed. On-line projection equipment is particularly useful for this.

The emphasis on data analysis focuses on statistical packages such as SPSS or SAS, rather than on system-specific job control language. Experience has demonstrated student use of these packages in their employment following graduation, and their simplicity serves to reduce anxiety associated with normal programming procedures. The level of statistical expertise remains minimal despite prerequisites, and instructors are well-served to focus on univariate and non-parametric techniques if this is students' first research course. The occasional advanced expertise of some teams should not be demotivated by this approach, however, and sufficient planning by the instructor to allow ample computer mass storage for more complex analysis is critical. Nothing works more to demotivate a research team than bureaucratically-imposed student default limitations on university computer facilities, when a justifiable need exists to

exceed these limitations.

In-class discussion of each element of the research process prior to its need in the project is critical, particularly during data analysis when earlier-learned concepts have decayed due to lack of application. Students should be encouraged to maximize the power of their statistical analyses, yet not to the point of insufficient coverage of other critical areas of the project.

Once the research document is prepared for submission to the client and the instructor (one copy graded and returned and one copy retained in the Marketing Department), student teams begin preparing and rehearsing for their presentation.

Walker and Etzel [4] noted, "Without effective communication of research results, the performance of research becomes only an academic task." Accordingly, each research team prepares a formal presentation of the results of their project to their classmates, client representatives, and concerned members of the faculty. In this way, other students have an opportunity to be exposed to research activities they may not have experienced in their own projects, and clients have a chance to ask questions arising from their prior reading of the research document.

Upon completion of the project, all materials are turned over to the client, and the nature of ethics and confidentiality of data discussed. Students are encouraged to request permission from their clients to duplicate an individual copy of the research document for use in future job interviews. A final peer and instructor evaluation concludes the semester.

RESULTS

At this point, it seems relevant to discuss the results of this experiential learning technique relative to the rather ambitious objectives stated earlier. Most importantly, beginning from the student perspective, the project approach has been extremely successful. It has not been uncommon to have placed students with their former research clients after graduation, and others have reported the effectiveness of their presenting the research document during job interviews. The rigor and steadfast adherence to strict deadlines, has sometimes been initially interpreted as overly harsh, yet feedback from students several years into their careers later reports its appropriateness. Again, the intent remains to parallel the real pressures and demands of the business world.

The feedback from clients similarly indicates the success of the technique. Some have equated the results with those obtained from professional consultants at a cost of \$15,000 or more. One project recently was entered as testimony in a Washington hearing involving consumer attitudes toward a particular product. Virtually every client reports the applicability of the results to some extent in their decision-making, and many continue to sponsor projects on an on-going basis each semester.

Finally, from the perspective of the university, the advertising research project technique has been instrumental in facilitating community relations, serving as a clearinghouse for guest speakers and other research-

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related projects, and resulting in funding to the university.

In summary, the technique seems to have been successful thus far in preparing students for careers in advertising research, communicating the essentials of research experientially and with a practical orientation. Further refinement occurs each semester as additional innovations are developed. Its ultimate success depends on that of its graduates, although it appears to be working thus far.

REFERENCES

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