

THREE PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT STUDENT LEARNING ACTIVITIES: SEPARATE BUT CONCEPTUALLY LINKED

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ABSTRACT

Three research-based and experientially time-tested personal development learning activities, completed by over 1,500 of the author's marketing students during a 25 semester time period, are described, including professor instructions, evaluation forms, and caveats for implementing. The relevance, conceptualization, and post project student assessment summary of the three learning activities are provided.

BACKGROUND COURSE INFORMATION

Marketing Strategy (130:191) at the University of Northern Iowa (AACSB accredited) is a senior level capstone required course for all Marketing majors (n = 467). The author has taught the course 36 times over 25 different semesters. Class enrollment has been as low as 30 and as high as 45 per section. The formal catalog description of 130:191 – Marketing Strategy is: “Integration of major marketing functions from a managerial perspective. Emphasis on developing marketing strategies and applying strategic marketing decisions. Three semester hours of credit” (University of Northern Iowa 2002).

One formal professional development learning activity required of students to partially meet the formal course goal is to develop, via teams of three students, an actionable marketing plan for a real client (Corbin 2002). During the 1999–2003 academic year time period, 108 marketing plans were developed by 108 different teams of marketing seniors (total 324 students; 108 teams @ 3 students/team) for businesses and not-for-profit agencies in the Cedar Falls-Waterloo, IA

market area. The complete marketing plan (verbal presentation, written plan, and peer/client evaluation) was worth 150 points (23% of course total).

While the author was satisfied that the development of a marketing plan to solve a client's problem, opportunity, or challenge required the students to apply their previous marketing course work and meet the overall course goal, he's always balanced that team developed professional marketing plan with three personal learning activities. And the three personal learning activities have been used, all or in parts, in two other classes taught by the author, Sales Management, and Principles of Marketing.

OVERVIEW OF THREE PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT LEARNING ACTIVITIES

The personal development learning activities required in the Marketing Strategy class are three separate but conceptually linked projects. Whereas the marketing plan professional development learning activity was a group (teams of three students) project, the personal learning activities

are, logically, individual student projects. For comparison purposes with the marketing plan, the three personal development learning activities have a combined worth of 75 points (11.5% of course total). Referring to the formal catalog description of the course and applying that information conceptually to the three activities, students are asked to integrate the major marketing functions, again from a managerial perspective, but as applied to marketing themselves. The three assignments, that have been completed by well over 1,500 of the author's students, are described below.

SELF-PROMOTION PROFESSIONAL PORTFOLIO

The first of the three learning activities is entitled, Self-Promotion Professional Portfolio. One of the four books required of the Marketing Strategy students to read is *Differentiate or Die: Survival in Our Era of Killer Competition* by Jack Trout and Steve Rivkin (2000). The book hammers home the concept, and so does the author to his students, that firms had better differentiate themselves against their competition and be positioned uniquely in their target market's mind or they will lose out. The author tells the students the same is true for getting (and maintaining) a job. He asks them to portray the typical job interview situation and what is done to differentiate one candidate from the other. The usual student answer depicts a sterile job interview scene where there is strong eye contact and verbal dialogue between the recruiter and applicant with no other visualization or excitement occurring in the room. The typical interview scenario is "listening" and "non-verbal communication" in orientation. Yet, it has been touted that 85 percent of learning is through the visual sense. Hence, the author apprizes his students that one way to be differentiated from other candidates is to show (visual) the recruiter tangible evidence of work completed. Instead of "talking" with the recruiter about what talents, skills, traits, attributes, and benefits one possesses for hiring purposes, why not "show" your "works" to the recruiter.

Sample work that could be included in a three-ring notebook and taken to the job interview, with Table of Contents and labeled dividers, include: marketing plan, marketing research paper, consumer behavior paper, web design concepts, evidence of cooperative education, internship or personal work experience evaluations/projects/recognition, liberal arts papers, work completed for a minor or emphasis, and personal artifacts (e.g., transcript, honors, awards, work with philanthropic groups, hobbies, etc.). The contents of the portfolio as well as the method of presenting the self-promotional material is entirely up to each student. Ninety-nine percent of the students utilize a three-ring notebook for their professional portfolio. One student, a web designer throughout his college life, submitted his portfolio on a computer disc. Another student, a part-time on-stage comedian, submitted a video tape of one of his performances along with an expose of his marketing talents and work experience accomplishments.

To date, no successful objective evaluation methodology/form has been developed for this project. Therefore, most students receive all of the modest number of points (25) assigned to the project, unless a portfolio is submitted with clear evidence of the material not being organized, no Table of Contents/dividers provided, and/or "junk" has been included.

The author informs his students that too many students enter the interview process hoping their good looks and good manners will get them a job. But, presenting tangible evidence to the recruiter of what differentiates them from other candidates might just be the self-promotion marketing principle to employ and become employed.

The caveat of using the portfolio as a self-promotional interview tool is that the student must know the market they are pursuing as a professional portfolio might be a taboo practice in certain industries. But, knowledge can be obtained of the acceptance level of a self-promotion professional portfolio by conducting an in-

formational interview, the next explained personal development learning activity.

INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW

The “Informational Interview,” sometimes referred to as “Back Door Interview,” is a methodology to “interview” an executive in a firm in an informal and non-official interview format (Baker-Andrus 2001; Shepard 1987). The process is one of gathering key and pertinent information about the firm, their hiring plans, and their hiring needs more so than a formal interview permits. The informational interview permits one to find out the “inside scoop” of the firm, possibly revealing to the student that the company or industry in what they originally visualized as glamorous or perfect for them is anything but ideal. And, by a student interviewing a business person that is higher in the chain of command than the Human Resources Office, should the student impress the executive, the student is given a referral that is close to impossible for the Human Resource personnel to ignore.

In the capstone Marketing Strategy class, each student is asked to meet with an executive in an industry in which they want to be employed. Students are to contact the executive of their choice on their own accord or the author will provide them with names of executives to contact. The interview format can be changed per course being taught. Example, in the author’s Sales Management class, students are requested to complete three informational interviews: one with a sales person who markets a tangible product, an interview with a sales rep who sells an intangible product, and the third interview with a sales manager. Students are told to request a 20 minute interview with the executive, fax, mail, or e-mail the business person an outline of the informational interview subject matter, and send the executive a hand-written post interview thank you note. The vast majority of interviews last 30–45 minutes. Approximately 40 percent of the students receive an internship, part-time job,

or request to interview for a full-time job as a result of the informational interview.

Students are provided with a series of five different topics of information they need to collect during their interview. Such feedback includes: (1) company information (i.e., products, goods, or services being marketed, customer type, target market, market segmentation, trade publications, and history of company), (2) executive’s biography (i.e., education background, job progression, present duties, satisfactions, frustrations, conflict between work and family, future plans, challenges faced, and advice to students entering the industry), (3) hiring information (i.e., education preferred, work experience preferred, personality type preferred, special abilities preferred, interview do’s and don’ts, opinion about the merit of a Professional Portfolio, resume style and content preferences, and qualifications needed of applicants to secure a job), (4) future of the organization, and 5) foreseen changes (i.e., the executive, the company, the industry, and the field of marketing).

The evaluation form for the Informational Interview is simple, either the student did (+ 1 point) or did not (0 points) provide the following 25 pieces of information (25 point project):

- Name, title, address, & telephone no. of business person.
- Product, good, service or idea of the business explained.
- Customer Type(s)/profile(s) explained—who they market to.
- Trade publications of industry/company.
- Business person’s:
 - Education background.
 - Work experience background.
 - Progression to obtaining current position.
 - Present duties and time/duty.
 - Satisfaction received in current job.
 - Frustrations of current job.
 - Conflict between work and family.
 - Future personal & professional development plans.

Greatest challenge faced.
Advice to enter this career field.

Hiring expectations:

Education preferred.
College major preferred.
Extracurricular activities preferred.
Work experience preferred.
Personality type preferred.
Special abilities preferred.
Qualifications most needed for company.

Future of the company

Greatest challenges the company faces.
Changes for company, industry, and/or business person.
Recommendation to be best prepared for change.

Professors differ on how they handle projects submitted late and/or if the paper does not follow a prescribed format. This author deducts at least one point for students not having or providing, as noted in his syllabi, evidence of: computer generated, double spaced, cover page, table of contents, headings, reference notation/citation, grammar checked, proof read, thank you letter to the business person interviewed, and page number identification.

At the end of the informational interview, the astute student will know whether this company/industry/field she/he just “interviewed” suits them and if so, what that company is seeking from job applicants. Approximately 40 percent of the students receive an internship, part-time job, or request to interview for a full-time job as a result of the informational interview. Approximately 33 percent of the students will complete, on their own volition, an additional informational interview, and approximately 20 percent will complete two or more supplementary back door interviews. In the 25 semesters the author has required this activity, he has NEVER had a student go unemployed if she/he implemented this job seeking method. The most number of informational interviews conducted by a student until the right job was found was 17, and that student is still, 15 years after graduation, with

that same Fortune 200 company and is now Vice President of Marketing.

MARKETING YOURSELF PROJECT

The “Marketing Yourself Project” is the last of three personal development learning activities. Another “sermon” or discourse the author’s students hear quite frequently is of the historical adage that “exchange is the fundamental and defining concept of marketing” (Kotler 1988). And with that, exchange not only exists between buyers and sellers, but it also exists in the employment arena. The hiring of an employee by an organization is, in essence, an exchange of the talents of the individual (the product) in return for a salary, expected productivity, and contribution to profit. People who are seeking employment are, therefore, marketing themselves.

With each student having completed an informational interview in an industry in which they want to become employed as well as a professional portfolio to “show off” tangible evidence of their talents, skills, and traits to get the job, now it’s time to put pen to paper, computer stroke to copy, and place a personal marketing plan in operation (Zigler and Corbin 2001). This project’s simple overview, as explained in the syllabi, is: “In this project you are being asked to market yourself, following the basic tenants of marketing.” The report (5 pages minimum) should cover these six topics: (1) initial career objective (i.e., one paragraph specific and not generalities description of the type of entry level job being pursued), (2) target market/market segment (i.e., detailed description of the type of business/industry from whom you are seeking employment), (3) product strategy (i.e., minimum of five of your personal features and corresponding benefits, and personalized statement that differentiates you from other students/job applicants), (4) pricing strategy (i.e., salary range for the job you are seeking – use www.salary.com or some reputable source vs. your hunches), (5) promotional strategy (i.e., location of job opportunity informa-

duplicated in the Marketing Yourself Project evaluation system. One of the better educational values of the Marketing Yourself Project is that students are forced to apply all of the marketing principles they've learned since their initial introduction to marketing, bringing closure to their marketing education, but, in this case, from a personal marketing perspective. Secondly, many students have told the author how valuable it was to have a step-by-step job seeking strategy plan in writing, better ensuring that they'd follow the plan to obtain an entry-level position.

SUMMARY

As evidenced by 25 semesters worth of anecdotal data completed by over 1,500 students, the three personal development student learning activities are perceived as very meaningful to the student vs. busy work or a meaningless assignment. Despite the relatively low weight (11.5% of course total) of the three projects towards the final grade, 100 percent of my students have completed the activities. Why? Students immediately see the relevance of the projects when it is explained to them on the first day of the semester. The projects apply to them personally. Students have also heard from their peers how the projects greatly assisted them in obtaining full-time entry level positions. The Department of Marketing has one of the highest placement rates on the 14,000 student population campus and students

The system identified and utilized in the Informational Interview project of reducing the number of total points when students failed to follow a preferred Professor paper style format is

[illegible]

have told the author that the three personal development projects greatly assist towards that departmental accolade.

An optional, anonymous, and confidential end-of-the-semester supplementary student assessment is administered in all of the author's classes seeking student's sentence completion of these five statements: (1) If I had to take this course over again, I'd . . . , (2) My advice to next semester's students is to . . . , (3) What one or two specific things did the professor do to "help" you learn how to become a marketer . . . , (4) What one or two specific things did the professor do that made it more "difficult" for you to learn how to become a marketer . . . , and (5) When you compare the "value" of this course to your other business and marketing classes, I honestly have to say . . . (Cross and Angelo 1993).

Invariably, over 50 percent of each semester's students comment that one, two, or all three of the projects, (a) be started earlier in the semester, (b) are the best projects ever completed in their entire college career, (c) were the answer to obtaining a meaningful job in the industry that best matched their talents, (d) were a perfect complement to the formal marketing plan development project—balancing personal work with professional work, (e) opened up their eyes as to who they were, personally and profes-

sionally, and (f) was the capstone experience of all capstone experiences as it brought three different appearing activities into a conceptually linked and as three cohesively supporting learning activities. Never (repeat, never) has even one of the over 1,500 students said that any of the three personal development marketing learning activities was a hindrance to their education, a waste of time, busy work, or lacking value. And approximately 25 percent of the students make a comment thanking the author for "requiring" them to complete the projects.

The three activities offer a balance between the hard work of developing a formal and serious marketing plan with developing a fun yet serious personal marketing plan. The three personal development marketing learning activities can be utilized, with more or less rigor, in other courses such as Principles of Marketing, Personal Selling, Sales Management, Advertising, Promotion, Distribution, Retailing, Pricing, and New Product Development.

The three assignments described in this article are research-based (Baker-Andrus 2001; Sheperd 1987; Zigler and Corbin 2001) and experientially time-tested (25 semesters and > 1,500 students) as proven personal and professional development conceptually linked learning activities.

ENDNOTE

- ¹ The author was the recipient of the 2003 Marketing Management Association Master Teacher Award.

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