LIES, SANS SEX, AND LACKING VIDEOTAPE

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ABSTRACT

Producing an annual report is never easy ... for the organization reporting to its stakeholders or for the marketing firm charged with preparing the document. In an effort to better understand the challenges inherent in communicating gains and losses to stakeholders in a tight educational market, students at Augustana College, a Midwestern Christian liberal arts institution, undertook preparation of the college's annual report. This project required students to work closely with college leaders -- including the CFO, President, Board of Trustees, and various vice presidents -- and progressed from ascertaining the client's needs to gathering, writing, editing, designing and finding a way to print as well as make an online report available. With no budget. There are valid reasons why accountants and marketers don't see eye-to-eye, as well as why marketing professors lecture ad nauseum about functional silos.

Students were actually approaching product, price, place and promotion principles in an all-new and all-too-real experiential learning environment that dictated costs, time, client wishes and stakeholder expectations. Plus, they were being graded on their team efforts to learn marketing communications while dealing with edicts from difficult clients.

Over the course of the semester, advanced marketing students learned to write good and bad news messages, to take a political position for a U.S. presidential or legislative candidate and write a constituent letter on his/her behalf, as well as to compose traditional business memorandums, letters, brochures, specifications, and strategic plans. For their midterm exam, students analyzed an annual report prepared for a local venture capital firm and were allowed to choose between preparing an online newsletter or annual report as a final project. Students overwhelmingly elected to tackle the annual report, to which one classroom speaker, the owner of a local marketing firm, said, "You're nuts! The work will kill you!"

Student teams began their project on behalf of Augustana College, which up to that point had prepared five various annual reports directed toward numerous constituencies. With the college's Vice President of Finance as their client, students proceeded to research, write, design and seek printers for an annual report that would replace all other versions with one consolidated report. In the process students learned the hard way that clients aren't easy to work with, they often go back on their word, and they fail to recognize professional work when they see it. The semester was filled with lies cloaked as misunderstandings, failures to communicate, scarce information, insufficient documentation and in-fighting without the benefit of video documentation -- all the issues they'd confront in the real world -- compressed into four intense months. And like the movie, "sex, lies and videotape," the action unfolded with multiple actors and with the inexorable march of time.

INTRODUCTION

Crossing the chasm separating marketing theory from practice is always a nerve-wracking step for college students. Teachers feel the same uncertainty when introducing an experiential learning component to the syllabus as a way to achieve learning objectives.

Professors, grappling with the vital task of preparing students for careers in a constantly changing and competitive workplace, have understandably turned to projects designed to turn theory into practice (Gremler 2000). Business programs have traditionally churned out graduates with exceptional quantitative and technical abilities but with little experience in practicing interpersonal and communication skills (Louis 1990). Today's escalated business environment requires marketers who can speak, write, think, solve problems and work in teams (Floyd and Gordon 1998). This environment requires professors to engage their students fully in the learning process, which includes assigning responsibility for their decisions (O'Banion 1997).

Augustana College is a 140-year-old liberal arts institution in the Midwest affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The college's lone marketing professor followed the findings of a study sponsored by the American Association of Higher Education, the Education Commission of the States, and The Johnson Foundation in respecting diverse talents and fostering a learner-centered environment that encouraged student-faculty contact, cooperation among students, active learning, prompt feedback, and setting priorities and high expectations as she designed an advanced course in marketing communications. As a fully engaged member of the Sioux Falls community, the college often worked with non-profit entities in devising cost-conscious business solutions (Lopez and Lee 2005).

Marketing students through the years have found the experiential learning component of their courses at Augustana College to be enjoyable (O'Hara and Shaffer 1995). Course evaluations consistently rate the practical assignments as most meaningful, transferable and indicative of the students' mastery of the subject matter.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES/OUTCOMES

Among the nine stated learning objectives, students consented to learn to work with and on behalf of business clients, to work as a team to meet client expectations and deadlines, and work with a client to plan, research, write, design and print an annual report and to begin development of a professional portfolio showcasing work produced inside and outside the classroom. In a bold move toward experiential learning and access to the college's software licenses, students also agreed to become acquainted with QuarkXpress, Photoshop, and Illustrator in the preparation of printed materials.

Students and their professor were convinced that experiential learning activities address the criticism that business schools place "too much attention on theories and concepts and not enough attention on communication, decision-making, and other skills that are at least as important to career success as content knowledge" (Lamb, Shipp, and Moncrief 1995).

Students learned throughout the semester to research and write press releases, memorandums, letters, brochures, annual reports, biographies, strategic plans, specifications, and instructions. In keeping with the notion of learner centered and collaborative learning, students were allowed to choose between producing an online newsletter for the Department of Business Administration and producing one comprehensive annual report for their college. Student teams overwhelmingly chose to plan, research, write, illustrate, design and print an annual report to satisfy the college as a whole. In preparation they reviewed and critiqued an annual report prepared for a local venture capital firm. This experience was useful for student learners who were studying how to effectively convey marketing communiqués to stakeholders.

The 25 students enrolled in the course agreed when adopting the syllabus that a major benefit of experiential learning is that they can combine process-oriented exercises with outcome-oriented information and more importantly, display evidence of their abilities to potential employers (Gremler 2000). They also said they believed the experience would be interesting and memorable and facilitate a more lasting learning exercise.

The semester's assignments included a text outlining business communication essentials and lab exercises. Speakers from the business community discussed topics such as communicating with potential employers, compiling work samples, assembling portfolios, writing news releases, developing effective media kits, planning news events, planning communication strategies, and putting together targeted resumes and cover letters. This combination gave students theoretical background in concepts and examples from business professionals as to how those concepts are applied on a daily basis.

EXPERIENTIAL CONCEPTS

Because group projects are shown to develop students' skills and abilities as managers (Eastman and Swift 2002), this marketing professor chose to include a final project along with exams, speakers, lectures, field trips and team presentations. Ideally, according to Bridges (1999), undergraduate experiential marketing

course design should include a variety of teaching methods, assigning a grade based upon many inputs, including attendance/participation, exams, team and individual projects and written and oral presentations.

Research shows that faculty encounter several problems with group projects, including assessing students' efforts, aiding good communication and coordination among members, and making sure the project is a truly collaborative effort. Furthermore, this professor acknowledged that working with the college itself, as well as its leaders, would pose specific problems for student teams, including managing expectations, documenting conversations and timetables, and delivering a product that met the needs of demanding factions within the college, all while on a nonexistent budget.

These potential problems were counterbalanced by the professor's confidence that student teams would learn nitty-gritty realities associated with real-life projects, gain stature among the college's decision-makers, practice time management skills, form at least a glancing knowledge of marketing-related software, add important documentation to their resumes, and exchange creative ideas in a problem-solving environment.

An applied 'client' class project is an experiential learning device in which students are required to conceptualize and solve actual business problems with the application of appropriate theories and techniques (Goodell and Kraft 1991). "Students find themselves in a situation where their efforts imply outcomes far broader than grades and entail risks to personal and university reputations as well as to 'client' outcomes" (Goodell and Kraft 1991). Active learning activities require students to be co-responsible for learning, which is applied beyond the classroom, and is eminently applicable to future situations (Smith and Van Doren 2004). The marketing professor knew the project would fit the course objectives, could feasibly be completed within the semester, and provided an orderly environment that generates fun (Smith and Van Doren 2004). It also offered the professor "the opportunity to illustrate concepts, techniques and skills in a real life business environment which involves the students and produces a useful result" (Goodell and Kraft 1991). As Goodell and Kraft continue in their litany of important qualifications, it's "less crucial, but still important, [that] the project should represent a complete business problem which the students can conceptualize, plan a solution for, and solve within the constraints of the course schedule" (1991). Furthermore, by "addressing real marketing challenges with short lead times is a business world reality and a challenge for which students must be prepared" (Lopez and Lee 2005), students were able to integrate concepts and make strategic connections between specific aspects of marketing (Bobbitt, Inks, Kemp and Mayo 2000).

Finally, the college-as-client forced students to work with a severely constricted nonprofit budget reality (Lopez and Lee 2005). As noted by Goodell and Kraft, client projects ought to pay for themselves. Costs should not fall on the shoulders of the professor, students or school, but should be assumed by the client. This, in the end, was the most important learning component of the entire experience.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Using a bidding process, students chose which of five teams they wanted to join. Options included account executives, copywriters, editors, designers and production managers. Each team was comprised of five members, led by an elected manager. Each team was provided with a job description and timetable, as assembled beforehand by the marketing professor. Also set ahead of time was the client, chosen through a process outlined by Goodell and Kraft (1999), as represented by the college's Vice President of Finance.

The professor divided the project into digestible parts and set deadlines for each successive segment, as suggested by Lopez and Lee (180). "Breaking the project into manageable parts has several benefits: making the project more manageable for both the students and instructor, guarding against students falling behind, keeping procrastinator students from waiting until the end of the course to do the entire assignment, and allowing the instructor to assess students' progress and offer feedback at multiple points along the way. Students also need firm project deadlines" (Lopez and Lee 2005). One firm deadline was a Board of Regents meeting set for early December, during which students would present a PowerPoint version of their annual report. Each team was given a deadline, after which the project was passed to the next team's manager. The copyediting team saw the project at least four times before it was sent to the printer to ensure

accuracy. The ultimate deadline was delivering a printed and online annual report before final grades were due on December 15.

Written instructions as well as in-class discussions assisted teams in grasping the intent of their portions of the project as well as how the project fit together and culminated in a printed version and PowerPoint version. Account executives communicated with the VP–Finance to record client demands. AEs developed a narrative of the meeting, which was distributed to each team. Copywriters followed the format requested by the client and began researching and writing. They passed their work to the copyeditors, who while fact-checking and overseeing the tone and tenor of the report, helped the designers to sketch out a format and length of the report. Designers, with the assistance of the copywriters, began gathering photos to illustrate the publication and prepared design notes that showed what material was to be covered and/or illustrated on each page spread, which core value was being reinforced, and who was responsible for gathering copy and photos. Designers also got quick lessons in Photoshop and QuarkXpress in order to assemble portions of the report.

In the end the report was organized according to the five underlying values of the college and outlined progress/activities in each of the five values. As the report took shape, production managers began assembling a specification sheet to supply to local printers. Depending upon a budget that was currently nonexistent, this team put together an RFP that outlined four options that covered ranges of page numbers, print colors and quantities and was distributed to five local printers. Throughout the semester, each team leader was charged with communicating with other teams leaders as the project marched inexorably toward the December deadline.

Admittedly, there were delays as the project progressed from team to team. Students' work, school and family schedules, vacations and unavailable informational contacts all contributed to delays, although team leaders kept the project apace with the overall deadline.

RESULTS/CHALLENGES

Results were surprising for everybody involved. The first surprise was the dearth of communication occurring in the marketing communication course. Busy junior and senior students who were juggling coursework, jobs and personal lives – often marriage and children – posed difficulties in getting together. Differences in quality of work aggravated some very serious marketing students, while others were happy to drift along with a minimum of effort. Struggles occurred in design issues, especially between the professor who insisted that the report be produced in QuarkXpress in order to facilitate any sweeping changes and the leader of the design team, who wished to complete all work in Photoshop despite the need to change multiple files each time a minor revision was required. Battles of will cropped up between teams and team members, all necessitating negotiation, meetings and other common business strategies to settle.

Students with creative tendencies quickly came to value the skills of accounting majors. Accounting majors in the class tended to approach projects very systematically, applying great organizational skills and spreadsheets showing the project's glide toward completion. Accountants make remarkably astute managers, keeping tabs on deadlines and costs and overall, well, accountability. Students learned that student teams require many diverse talents and approaches and came to appreciate skill sets different than their own.

Aside from the predictable time management and differences in writing styles, some issues ran far deeper. The production management team presented the VP of Finance four different options in printing the final report, including versions from a black and white version to four-color throughout, with requisite prices and delivery options. Later that day the VP stopped the instructor and admitted that he could only afford the black and white option. The professor assured the VP that this was a viable option and one proposed, and acknowledged as realistic, by students. Then the next day the VP told the assembled students who were busily preparing their PowerPoint presentation to the Board of Regents that he had never committed to printing the report and was backing out of the project altogether.

Shocked members of the AE team hastily looked at the professor, mouthing dismay that this ran counter to what the VP had told them and they had documented in their client notes. This also shocked the professor, who had to swiftly shift the focus from the VP of finance, who had promised a printed copy of the report for each student's portfolio, and back to the preparation of the Power Point presentation. After the class two students approached the professor, offering names of college supporters who would gladly donate to the printing of the report, including one donor who later that month gave the college $1 million toward the funding of a new football facility.

Despite the lack of proof, videotaped or audiotaped, that showed otherwise, students trooped onto campus the first Saturday in December to present their report to the Board. The report included a letter from the college president as well as the chair of the Board, and one student had managed all communications between copywriters and the president/chair. In the end, the board voted unanimously to support the report and requested that a PDF file be posted on the college's website for all to see and read.

The professor took the opportunity during the next class to remind students that "there is nothing extraordinary in the concept of business that excuses it from what society believes to be ethical and moral behavior" (Robin and Reidenbach 1987). Ethics enter classroom discussions regularly, but students expressed dismay at the "disconnect" between the college's mission statement and how that Christian mission is borne out in "interactions with publics" (Robin and Reidenbach 1987). Students were somewhat surprised that business issues are not simply black and white, forcing them as practitioners to "evaluate and distill the often conflicting" information into viable decisions (Schaupp and Lane 1992).

Support was overwhelming across campus, despite the VP's decampment at the last moment. One donor graciously paid to print the report in four color, and copies were supplied to each of the college's departments, each student in the class and each member of the Board of Trustees. The professor and students followed up with each participant with a handwritten thank-you note. The note to the VP of Finance was understandably brief, but honest in its thanks for the learning opportunity.

CONCLUSION

While the instructor hoped the project would benefit students as well as the college, it was viewed primarily as a motivator to "cement" the subject matter in students' minds (Goodell and Kraft 1991). Being involved in a real business challenge is much more interesting and outcomes more difficult to predict than case studies. Life is stranger than fiction, one student noted, summing up succinctly what Granitz (2001) claimed when he said "isolation from business and its practices, fellow students and society may lead to diminished meaning of marketing education for marketing students." Students claimed active learning, closely linked to current business practices, offered more impact than lectures or historical perspectives, provided theories have already been covered (Mellor 1991). In other words, they gained personal relevancy from active participation in the planning and production of a real marketing communication vehicle.

Students also learned poignantly how communication can become complicated and misleading, despite best efforts to keep channels open and operating. Lying can be couched in many ways, and speaking the truth is often perceived in various ways by various receivers. Finding solutions to miscommunicated expectations is a true skill, and one that students learned keenly. There is simply no protecting students from learning the tough lessons of working directly with clients.

Perhaps the biggest lesson of all was learned despite the best efforts of the professor to manage the project. Clients are often difficult to please, change their minds, and may not always display the virtues they espouse.

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