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Education Track**

**The Great Case Debate: Comprehensive Experiential Learning in an Undergraduate
Marketing Capstone Course**

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Extended Abstract

INTRODUCTION

The value of experiential learning has long been extolled in the advertising and marketing education community. Extensive literature on this topic suggests that educators embrace more interactive, real world assignments because they require students turn theory into practice, motivate and engage student's desire to learn with purposeful work, and increase retention of important concepts and principles.

Yet despite the recognized and heavily published advantages of experiential learning, actual use in the classroom is surprising limited. While there has been lots of talk, in actuality there has been little change, and the gap between the skills and abilities desired by employers and those possessed by college graduates continues to grow.

Given the importance of graduates having a grasp of the marketing fundamentals needed as they enter the workforce, and the proven effectiveness of experiential learning activities in helping students develop the desired knowledge base and skill sets, it can be argued that students need more experiential learning opportunities. One course where *all* advertising and marketing students benefit from such activities is the capstone.

The purpose of this paper is to share what we have found to be a powerful experiential learning assignment that enables students to achieve the strategic, quantitative, and creative learning objectives typical in both advertising and marketing capstone courses, requiring them to pull from the knowledge base they have established in their undergraduate education to analyze, make recommendations, and defend their proposals in what they consider to be a stressful environment.

INTRODUCTION TO THE GREAT CASE DEBATE

The Great Case Debate assignment is designed to incorporate that which has been learned in current and prior discipline-specific courses, role playing to apply theories, concepts, and principles developed in more topical related courses (e.g. IMC, Direct Marketing, Database Marketing, Internet, Sales Management, Buyer/Org Behavior, Logistics, Entrepreneurship, Product Development, etc.), and create a comprehensive solution. Moreover, it requires students compete with their peers to demonstrate their knowledge of the business situation and convince the audience to judge their work superior to the competition.

Critical factors to consider in setting up the Great Case Debate include:

- *Case selection.* Care should be taken to select marketing cases that require students to consider the many aspects of direct and interactive marketing ... target market selection, segmentation issues, positioning, the handling of the marketing mix, etc. Cases for this assignment should contain substantial information about the industry, company, and the competitive environment to insure that students are confronted with the ambiguities, disorganization, and sometime conflicting information found in the work world.
- *Selection of group members.* The ideal size group is 3 to 5 students, depending on class size. An even number of groups is required to enable two teams to work on the same project. Group selection should be completed very early in the semester to give students sufficient time to analyze their cases and prepare their campaigns.
- *Diverse roles for all in the class.* Group members are instructed to put themselves in the shoes of the protagonist(s) in the case. It works well when group members take on organizational roles in the company being analyzed, (e.g. Director of Marketing, Customer Service Manager, Finance Director, etc.). Classmates not presenting take on the role of Board of Directors members. The instructor serves as President/CEO of the organization in the case, and invited guests (other faculty members, visiting business people, etc.) play major stockholders. Audience members query the presenters based on their roles and knowledge of the case. (Board members have read the case, stockholders have not.)
- *Timing.* The debates take place between weeks 11 and 13 of a 16 week semester to minimize potential conflicts and time demands with other, large end-of-term projects required in other courses. Table 1 provides a timetable for a 75 minute Great Case Debate course.
- *Debate format.*
 - The debate starts with the instructor welcoming visitors and providing a brief situational analysis on which the presentations are based.
 - Each group then gives a portion of their presentation; 1) problem definition and introduction of alternatives; 2) discussion of uncertainties and assumptions made to create their campaigns, evaluation of alternatives; and 3) recommendations and suggested implementation timetable. Visuals such as PowerPoint presentations, handouts, etc. are highly recommended.
 - At the conclusion of the presentations, the groups question each other to demonstrate their proficiency with the case and showcase the weaknesses of their opponents' work. Both groups are then questioned by the Board and major stockholders.
 - Once presentations and Q/A periods have been completed, the presenting groups leave and the Board members and major stockholders discuss what they just experienced. The Board then votes to select the group it thinks has the better plan. Voting options include Group 1, Group 2, and neither group.

- The presenting groups are then invited back into the room and asked to immediately assess their work to determine what they would have done differently. Voting results are then revealed.
- In depth analysis paper. In addition to the presentation, presenting groups are required to submit an in depth analysis of their campaign plans. The plan is written in “deck” format with each element of the plan clearly and concisely presented on one or two pages. The “deck” format introduces students used to writing lengthy academic papers to the more concise writing requirements of the work world. Table 2 provides a more detailed description of the Great Case Debate “deck” format with grading items.

CONCLUSION

Debate has been found to be a strong experiential learning tool for the development of the analytic, creative, and communication skills demanded of advertising and marketing students entering the workforce. With the proper preparation and management by faculty, the Great Case Debate helps students analyze business situations, make overarching strategic decisions, develop creative plans based on that strategy, and defend those recommendations in the heat of conflict. If the mission of marketing educators is to prepare students for the work world, the Great Case Debate has demonstrated its ability to be the crowning experience in any discipline’s capstone.

TABLE 1: Timetable for Great Case Debate Presentations

Task	Time
<i>Introduction</i>	
Instructor welcomes guests and introduces case. Provides situational information common to both groups.	7 minutes total
<i>Presentation</i>	
Problem definition & introduction of alternatives	10 minutes total (5 minutes each group)
Assumptions, uncertainties & alternative evaluation	16 minutes total (8 minutes each group)
Recommendations & implementation	12 minutes total (6 minutes each group)
<i>Q&A</i>	
Competing group members question each other	6 minutes total
BOD, company head, & major stockholders question groups	10 minutes total
<i>Evaluation</i>	
BOD & stockholders evaluate presentations of each group. BOD votes for team they believe would be better to implement the project	8 minutes total
Winning groups announced	5 minutes total

TABLE 2: Great Case Debate “Deck” Format with Grading Items

Section	Description/Critical Content	% of Paper Grade	Typical Problems Students Experience
Synopsis	One page synopsis describing the situation facing the protagonist. Gives reader enough background information to understand the remaining analysis.	5%	Too little/too much background. Focus on irrelevant information.
Problem Definition	One sentence containing overall - objective of case - metric used to measure achievement of objective - environmental constraints that caused the problem to be	15%	Confuse symptom for problem. Incorrect/ineffective metric selected. Missing one or more elements in the problem definition.
Alternative Identification	List of all alternatives discussed in the case - “Do Nothing” option always included	5%	Miss options discussed in case. Forget “Do Nothing” option. Create options that cannot be evaluated given information from case.
Relevant Information	Relevant internal and external factors affecting the situation & decision makers. Comprehensive, yet concise SWOT analysis	10%	Omit important information. Include information irrelevant to “solving” the case.
Uncertainties	Relevant information gaps or conflicting information presented in the case. Must identify what is unknown past and present, not future.	5%	Stated in future tense, based on action(s) that haven’t occurred. Focus upon information gaps irrelevant to solving the case.
Assumptions	Substantiated statements that fill the information gaps outlined in uncertainties section. Should match with the uncertainties identified.	5%	Not supported by data included in the case. Not relevant to “solving” the case” Don’t match uncertainties identified.
Evaluation of Alternatives	Description & analysis of each alternative – strategic, financial, creative implications	20%	Omission of quantitative analysis of each alternative. Fail to examine every alternative identified
Recommendations	Option chosen by the team based on entire evaluation	10%	Recommend option not evaluated.
Implementation	Brief description of campaign timing, how & when results will be analyzed.	5%	Forget to tie back to metric identified in problem definition
Writing Style/ Grammar	Understandable content in bullet point format. Grammar, spelling, punctuation. Follows “deck” format instructions. Written concisely, yet comprehensively.	20%	Incomplete thoughts. Typos. Verbose. Ineffective presentation of quantitative data. Document written in a traditional “term paper” format.