Catering to Clients: Meeting Students' Career Needs with a Client-Based Project in Food Marketing[1]

Danielle M. Kaminski[2], David L. Ortega[3]
and R. Brent Ross[4]
Michigan State University
East Lansing, MI

Abstract

While client-based projects (CBPs) are commonly associated with business schools they can also be appropriately applied in food marketing and other agricultural courses. Not only does this experiential learning activity appeal to students from a variety of backgrounds, but it also provides all students an opportunity for job skill development. CBPs, however, require coordination between all parties involved: instructors, students, clients, and outreach specialists. We offer recommendations for implementing a food marketing CBP in the areas of client selection, course scheduling, grading, and student group management.

Introduction

Despite an increase in the number of students enrolling in colleges and universities, agricultural colleges and departments experienced a significant decline in enrollment at the end of the 21st century (Baker et al., 2011). At the same time the number of students entering pre-professional tracks as freshmen increased. However, strict acceptance rates have resulted in a large portion of these students enrolling in non-professional track academic programs (Baker et al., 2011). For instance, some students who were not admitted into supply chain management or marketing programs in business schools have been known to enroll in agribusiness management or food industry management degree programs that include similar content and skills specifically within the agriculture or food industries. Incorporating client-based projects (CBPs), case studies, and/or group work can increase the attractiveness of agricultural programs to these students since these methods are often used in business schools. Furthermore, engaging in these similar experiential learning opportunities improves the competitiveness of agricultural majors upon graduation.

Several studies have found that undergraduate students positively perceive CBPs, preferring them to lectures, rating instructors favorably on teaching evaluations, and recognizing that completing a CBP can aid skill development in addition to content knowledge acquisition (Gundala et al., 2014; Bove and Davies, 2009; Parsons and Lepkowshka-White, 2009; Lopez and Lee, 2005). Nevertheless, instructors who include CBPs also concede challenges in implementing such projects. While their words of caution and the advice provided by them and others can be useful for any instructor considering a marketing CBP, there are unique challenges to implementing these projects in an agricultural discipline. Therefore, this article seeks to bridge the transfer of pedagogical tools across disciplines in much the same way as Getter and Behe (2012) offered methods for incorporating case studies into horticulture courses.

This article proceeds by detailing a CBP in an upperclassmen food marketing management class required of food industry management majors at a Midwest land grant university. Specific tips on how an instructor can implement or improve these projects are proffered based on the instructors' experiences and student course evaluations.

Project Description

Students work in groups to complete a marketing plan report and presentation for a local food company, the client. Students are introduced to the clients via client presentations at the close of the first month of class. In their presentations the clients provide information on their business ranging from their company's mission statement to prior sales figures, information on the product or service, and questions or problems that their company is trying to address. It is not uncommon for clients to bifurcate into two groups, those with a series of problems and those with a targeted action they would like students to take. The latter are not necessarily

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[2]Graduate Student, Department of Agricultural, Food, and Resource Economics, 446 W. Circle Dr., Rm 202 Morrill Hall of Agriculture; kamin107@msu.edu
[3]PhD, Associate Professor, Department of Agricultural, Food, and Resource Economics, 446 W. Circle Dr., Rm 317A Morrill Hall of Agriculture; dlortega@msu.edu
[4]PhD, Associate Professor, Department of Agricultural, Food, and Resource Economics, 446 W. Circle Dr., Rm 317B Morrill Hall of Agriculture; rross@msu.edu

easier or better for students to work with as they may have neglected underlying problems or brainstormed an idea that may not be the most effective. This ambiguity often occurs in client relationships and helps students to develop problem solving and analytic skills.

Following the client presentations, students are required to submit a detailed two-page proposal that describes the marketing problem and marketing plan activities (such as writing a consumer analysis report or conducting a consumer focus group discussion), indicates which team member will complete each task and when, and details the final project deliverables (the marketing plan report and presentation, plus any primary data collected, original advertisements, etc.). While the proposal helps students to start the project early, plan tasks for throughout the semester, and brainstorm the project direction, a market analysis report is critical for student refinement and definition of the targeted marketing problem. Prior to implementing the proposal many student groups propose to tackle too many marketing problems or pick an area of interest (like creating a social media campaign) that is misaligned from client needs.

Upon collecting and analyzing secondary data, students submit a draft of the market analysis report halfway through the semester. Students are provided a set of guiding questions adapted from Wood (2011) for conducting a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis focusing on the external environment, company, product category, competitors, and consumers. Not only does the market analysis justify the area of focus and recommendations that the students make in the remainder of the marketing plan, but it also assists students in (re)defining the key marketing problem.

The market analysis report also becomes part of the final marketing plan. The professionally bound marketing plan report is limited to 10 pages (1.5 spacing, Times New Roman 12-point font) plus exhibits, a 1-page executive summary (single spacing, Times New Roman 12-point font), table of contents, and the market analysis report. This structure mirrors marketing plans that business professionals produce while being manageable for students. The executive summary and table of contents ease readability for the clients who may not be familiar with this type of document. The ability to add tables and figures such as product positioning maps, new product labelling ideas, photographs of the product in stores, graphs, charts and so on provides additional flexibility for students to communicate their points and be creative without the temptation to sacrifice written analysis. Just as with the market analysis report, students are provided an outline of questions adapted from Wood (2011) to help structure the marketing plan. The marketing plan includes the market analysis report, marketing objectives, market segmentation, and marketing mix recommendations.

Since the client proposal and the draft market analysis report are due prior to the final marketing plan, the conceptual improvement is obvious to both instructors and students. By the end of the project students have not only learned and had to apply the different components of a marketing plan report, but also practiced (a) problem identification and definition, (b) project management, (c) research, (d) revision, and (e) cohesiveness, both in terms of unifying voices within the report but also in matching the problem definition to client needs and the student's recommendations.

Finally, students also practice presentation skills when they present their findings and recommendations to the clients in class at the end of the semester. These presentations allow the clients to ask questions. The face-to-face oral presentation of the report material, in addition to the printed report, further provides students the opportunity to elaborate on the logic behind their final recommendations.

Instructor Recommendations

The final marketing plan reports and presentations are often impressive but there is substantial effort exerted by all parties involved in the CBP to get to that point. The following section provides recommendations for project implementation based on the authors' experiences and reflections.

Client Selection and Interaction

In the project description most of the emphasis was on students - what they are expected to do and how they will benefit from this CBP. Most of what follows here will focus on the instructor's role. However, recommendations for client selection and interaction revolve around the two other critical parties in this experiential learning project, the clients and the outreach specialists who work closely with the clients.

Preparation for these projects begins the semester before they are implemented. Approximately three to six months before the course begins, outreach specialists compile a list of potential clients for the project. Agricultural or food innovation centers, or outreach specialists who work with food and beverage producers and retailers, are unique to large land grant institutions and agricultural colleges. Assisting clients defines their work. However, these specialists may not concentrate in marketing or have the capacity to assist all potential clients themselves. These CBPs extend the services available to clients. In the process, it reaffirms existing and future relationships as the specialists assess client needs, confirm contact information and schedules, and follow-up on the recommendations provided by students. Additionally, many clients tell colleagues about the benefits of participating in the project which can increase the visibility of outreach centers and the university more generally.

To increase the likelihood of success stories for all parties involved, specialists use certain guidelines when narrowing the list of clients to the final selection. (Note: four to six clients appear optimal for a class of approximately 40 to 70 students, however, the specific choice will depend on the quality of available clients and class size.) The client must demonstrate a marketing need, but they must also demonstrate a sound business plan, high level of communication, and commitment to participation. The company must already have a marketable product (or service). They must be able to implement student suggestions, rather than expect one-time labor from students. For example, students cannot feasibly design and/or produce a new product, contact brokers, set meetings with retailers, and have the product introduced in a new retail store in the course of one semester. However, students can conduct surveys, product sensory evaluations and focus groups, and present suggestions for marketing mix components. Thus, the clients' current marketing needs must align with feasible areas that students can address and that the client has the capacity to act upon the student project recommendations.

Potential clients must respond promptly to emails or phone calls which suggests that they will be available to students for questions. They must also commit to an on-campus presentation early in the semester (the client presentation) and during the last weeks of the semester (when students present to the clients). This face-to-face interaction with the client reinforces the "real-life" experiential element of the project for students.

Throughout these interactions with the clients it is critical that someone from the university always be the primary contact. At the start of the project this will be the outreach specialist. During the scheduling of presentations, it may either be the outreach specialist or the course TA or instructor, depending on personal preference. At this stage the primary contact schedules two client presentations per class period for consecutive class periods. He or she mails campus maps, directions, and parking passes to the client with a letter clarifying the schedule and presentation expectations. We recommend that clients prepare a 15-20 minute presentation and be prepared for questions for the remainder of their slot. In our 80 minute periods, this allows 20-30 minutes for delays in client set-up, product demonstration, and student questions. This meeting between the client and the students often strikes a nice balance between the client's perspective of their marketing problem and the students' ability to learn about company constraints and culture while also performing an external evaluation of marketing needs. After client presentations we ask each student group to identify an individual who will be responsible for communicating with the client. This increases coordination within the group, decreases the number of requests to the client, and primes the client to respond promptly to the students. After the student presentations at the end of the semester, the outreach specialist communicates with the client to assist in implementation of recommendations, evaluate the experience from the client's perspective for improving future iterations, and learn about the impact of the project on the client's business.

Course Schedule

Earlier we discussed what happens before and after the semester begins. Now we take a deeper look at what happens during the semester. Before we address recommendations for the course schedule, though, it is important to remind the reader that the course in which this CBP is implemented is an upperclassman course which has a prerequisite food marketing course, and which is complimented by three other marketing courses in the program, one of which is also required. Therefore, the content of the course can focus on market research, without also requiring time to introduce basic marketing concepts.

Since the project is labor intensive for students and important to all parties involved, the project is a primary focus of the course. The project is introduced on the first day of class. Project details, including the specific requirements for the proposal, market analysis, and market research report, are available on the course webpage and discussed in class within the first two weeks before the clients arrive. Bookended between the introduction of the project and the final submission of the report and presentation to the client are the two previously mentioned components, the proposal and market analysis report. We recommend breaking the assignment into multiple components because it (1) allows students to receive more frequent feedback, (2) helps students with time management, and (3) provides additional guidance for students.

The client proposal is a critical component of this project despite being a short document. It allows the instructor or course assistants to ensure that students are on the right track to satisfying the clients' needs. The requested milestone table is a pictorial representation of the time investment required. Svinicki and McKeachie (2014) discusses the importance of own-goal setting for effective learning, motivation, and emotional development regarding goal achievement and failure. The proposal allows students to set their own goals and determine the direction of the project. The market analysis report which is due approximately three weeks later helps to hold students accountable throughout the process. Midway through the semester it allows students to reassess their progress. It once again allows the instructor to redirect and refocus groups that may be struggling to achieve the learning objectives or fail to demonstrate the quality expected by the client. Without being too specific to limit student creativity or growth along Grow's Staged Self-Directed Learning (SSDL) Model (Grow 1991/1996), the design of the three component assignments provides direction for students. Students are not required to memorize the steps in the market research project. Rather, each step is listed and described in class lectures and the textbook. Students practice completing each stop via this experiential learning assessment, which helps them retain market research knowledge.

Grading

The most frequent critical feedback we receive on final evaluations for this course relates to grading. Students report that the grading is too harsh. It is our preference to have high expectations for these assignments and grade strictly, especially for the client proposals and market analysis report. We couple these standards with detailed feedback which indicates methods of improvement for students. Our experience is that the combination of plentiful feedback and potentially lower-than-expected grades motivates students to exert additional effort, culminating in truly well-developed, professional reports and marketing plans for clients. Student grades are often significantly higher on each subsequent component, with overall course grades being no lower, on average, than the other courses taught in the program. Strict grading and high expectations beginning with the first component of the assignment aligns the primary external motivator that students are accustomed to in all of their courses (i.e. grades) with the project specific motivator (i.e. a quality deliverable that can be implemented by the client). We have obtained feedback from students who have earned internships with their clients or pursued marketing positions after graduation that the exacting standards for the CBP prepared them to write professional reports. In essence our approach extends the developmental curricular design beyond the years in university to those spent learning on-the-job. We must remember that in addition to learning new skills, students must also often adjust to different quality standards when transitioning into the workforce. By expecting professional quality reports in this collective, well-defined environment, we enhance the job market competitiveness and ease the occupational transition of our students.

Groups

There is extensive literature about group assignment. In this particular course we assign groups. This not only mirrors the real-world experience of marketers and their coworkers, but also seems to increase parity across final report quality. We prefer groups of five to six students. Any more and students report issues with free-riding and scheduling problems. Any less and students' out of class schedules are significantly burdened. As our class sizes have increased, we have adapted to assign two or more groups per client. This is better than increasing the group size as explained above, and better than adding additional clients. We have not found it necessary to have unique client-group pairs. Adding clients would increase strains on class time for presentations and on finding clients who meet the previously discussed standards. In practice, multiple groups often define or approach the marketing problem of the client differently. This is not only beneficial to the client who receives multiple valid suggestions, but also for students who realize that there is no single right approach or answer in marketing.

Our efforts at group assignment attempt to mitigate the time and contribution demands inherent in group projects. But it is impossible to alleviate all of the challenges associated with group work. Navigating these challenges, developing teamwork skills, is one of the goals of the CBP. To encourage effort in a group environment and address student concerns about shirking, we request peer evaluations at the end of the project. Grades are adjusted based on student feedback. Not every individual member of the group receives the same grade. In fact, a student who receives a grade of zero from each of his or her group members, is reported to not have contributed, can fail the project despite the fact that other members of the group receive a satisfactory score. (Note: a signal that a student did not contribute to a project is typically supported by their performance during the group presentation.) These peer evaluations encourage accountability and fit the institutional norms of individualized assessment. This grading methodology develops both positive interdependence and individual accountability, two elements necessary, but seemingly at odds, for cooperative teams (Johnson, Johnson, and Smith, 2006).

Summary

The higher education literature includes many forms of evidence supporting the use of CBPs and group work in college classrooms. These tools can more closely align students' experiences in the classroom with those they will have working. Students develop social skills, problem solving skills, professional communication abilities, and research skills. At the same time, students are often more motivated, more engaged in the classroom experience, and exert more cognitive effort throughout the course.

While we expect that these same benefits would result from a group CBP in another food marketing management course, there are few examples of such activities in non-business school degree programs. As Svinicki and McKeachie (2014) states, students need to develop the ability to learn in each specific discipline what it means to learn and think in the way that is unique to that field. This work adds to the recent trend of applying and evaluating pedagogical theories and practices in various disciplines, enabling educators a better understanding of how to teach in their specific disciplines.

We have described the use of a CBP in a food marketing management course and provided recommendations for application and replication in other agriculture or food-based marketing classes. These recommendations address grading, student group management, scheduling, and interactions with clients. While some of these recommendations mirror those existing in the current literature, others, particularly in regard to client interactions, are discipline specific. We hope that food and agriculture marketing instructors can use this article to implement CBPs or group work in their courses.

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