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Harnessing the Synergy Between Marketing Students and the Local Community: Writing Marketing Plans for Small Businesses

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Introduction

Today's political environment demands an ever-increasing responsiveness from universities to be more involved with the local community. No institution, large or small, private or public, can afford to neglect the community they serve. This coupled with the drive, curiosity, and knowledge of students and faculty provide excellent opportunity for both the university and the local community to collaborate in a mutually beneficial relationship.

Students often become tired of studying abstract topics without seeing how the knowledge can be applied. This is especially true among senior undergraduate and graduate students who want reassurance that what they are learning is in fact valid and useful outside the classroom. Presenting these students with “real world” problems is often a challenge for faculty members. One solution to providing senior undergraduate and graduate students the opportunity to solve real world problems is by having them write a *Marketing Plan*.

A further advantage to the instructor is the opportunity to leverage this real-world activity in the area of case-writing. Increasing legislative input into the faculty evaluation and performance system (e.g., post-tenure review) coupled with the dominating “publish-or-perish” philosophy, has compelled faculty members to look for alternatives, besides teaching and service, to secure promotion and tenure. One possible alternative for faculty members is to be actively involved in case writing research. Involving students in the collection and analysis of qualitative and quantitative primary data coupled with solutions to real world problems give faculty members an excellent opportunity to publish and disseminate case research of real companies.

The Benefits

Having student teams develop marketing plans for local businesses provides benefits on a number of levels;

- 1) Exposure to real-world professionals.
- 2) Exposure to real-world problems.
- 3) A heightened sense of urgency that one might not get from simply working cases or assignments from a book.
- 4) A real-life example of a marketing project to be discussed in class and in job interviews.

Perhaps most importantly, the creation of a marketing plan from scratch, for a real-world company with real-world problems, affords students a comprehensive learning experience in the development of marketing strategy and marketing programs. This project works best for a senior level undergraduate or graduate course in marketing management or marketing strategy. It is normally the major assignment for the semester.

Objectives

Some of the objectives of this assignment are to help students:

- 1) Learn to compile a professional marketing plan.
- 2) Learn to comprehensively analyze a marketing situation for a firm.

- 3) Obtain real-world experience by providing consultation to a real company.
- 4) Obtain experience in presenting marketing tactics, strategy, and programs.

Procedure

While the project is introduced on the first day of class, students will not commence work with local firms until about one quarter of the way through the semester. This gives the instructor several class periods to:

- 1) Establish the concept of marketing strategy development.
- 2) Instruct students in the various analytic methods utilized for situation analysis and strategy development.
- 3) Provide some instruction on the proper protocols when dealing with small business professionals on a consulting project (this is normally not in the textbook).

The best method for identifying small businesses in the local area is through the local Small Business Association (SBA), Small Business Development Center (SBDC), or local Chamber of Commerce. The instructor should attempt to identify a single point of contact with one of these organizations, in order to minimize the administrative burden of balancing multiple teams and multiple businesses. In some cases, it may be appropriate to assign multiple teams to a single business (for example, when the business owner is interested in obtaining alternative potential plans).

Once teams have been assigned to firms (this can be done randomly or systematically), the initial meeting is brokered between the firms and the teams. The SBDC normally handles this. Subsequent to the initial meeting, students work independently with their client firms. As the student teams begin to progress with their clients, related material from the text is covered in class, beginning with Situation Analysis through Evaluation and Control. In this manner, just-in-time instruction accompanies the project schedules.

Prior to the end of the semester, each student team will make a presentation of the key findings of their projects. The presentation covers the highlights of their Marketing Plan (e.g., environmental analysis, SWOT analysis, target market, marketing mix, etc.). It is an opportunity for the team to share their strategic thinking with the class, and to solicit input on their plans prior to finalizing them.

Subsequent to their presentations, the teams will then finalize their marketing plans. The plans are turned in to the professor for a grade. The professor will give input to improve the plans. Finally, the finished plans will be delivered to the clients, with highlights of the plans presented at the time of delivery.

Issues for Discussion

Some potential issues for class discussion are:

- 1) What are some of the challenges of developing a situation analysis?
- 2) What types of decisions required what types of information?
- 3) What was learned about the relative impact of the various elements of the marketing mix from situation to situation?

- 4) What was learned about the need for a detailed and thorough approach to the planning and execution of marketing programs?

Conclusion

Conducting and overseeing the marketing plan projects provides faculty members another tool to bring real life problems into the classroom. It does so at a level where the student is somewhat experienced. The project helps bind students more closely to the university and the local community because they feel they have played a part in improving the small business. The institution benefits (through goodwill) from serving their constituency.

After the plan is completed, the faculty member can request the small business owner for permission to convert the marketing project into a case study. The results of the project may be presented at conferences and/or published in proceedings, journals, or textbooks (which benefits the faculty member toward promotion and tenure). Finally, the overall project can provide the local SBDC the opportunity to generate consultation hours that could be used to receive government funding in the future. In summary, it is a true “win-win” situation for all parties involved (i.e., faculty, students, university, the small business, and the SBDC).