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Baby you can drive my car. Using primary target customers to develop your marketing communications

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Baby you can drive my car. Using primary target customers to develop your marketing communications

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Abstract

This paper details a live case study that is a successful three-way collaboration between a leading automobile manufacturer (the client), a group of sixty two final year marketing students in groups of fours and fives (the agencies); and a leading international university in Dubai, UAE (the liaison). The client is introducing a new model and has commissioned the fourteen competitive marketing communication agencies to pitch for the role of launch management team. The results suggest a win, win, win situation; whereby the client gets a suite of creative ideas from their primary target market, the agencies gain experience of working for one of the worlds most reputed brands and the liaison enhances its links with the international business community.

Keywords: *live case study, industry collaboration, marketing*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

First author is Dr. Alun Epps whose current research includes; consumer behaviour in computer mediated environments, search engine marketing, short messaging service marketing and the marketing usage of information and communication technologies in small to medium enterprises. Alun has presented his research at numerous international conferences, winning a best paper award in June 2007. Prior to commencing academic duties, he served in the U.K. media industry with the BBC, Virgin and Rank.

1. Introduction

In achieving and maintaining a competitive edge in a rapidly changing world, individuals and organisations have to face numerous challenges. Universities can prepare students for these challenges with the proven methods of lectures, tutorials, coursework and examinations. They can also directly involve industry in this process, not only with work placements, internships and guest lectures but by using groups of students as consultants and service providers.

This research aims to report and investigate the effect on students of running a “live” case study as part of a final year marketing subject. In December 2007, the marketing management of the UAE distributor of a leading automobile manufacturer approached senior academics at the University of Wollongong in Dubai with the view to using student groups as marketing communications agencies to devise the local launch concept of their new car model. Between February and April 2008, fourteen four or five delegate teams developed marketing communications plans within academic and industry-specific parameters culminating in a two day “pitch-athon”. Only an elite few of these pitches would be short-listed to go on to the next stage and present their concepts to the top management at the automobile distributor’s head office. The winner of the final stage will have their concept adopted as the launch campaign.

The project had several stakeholders; the agencies or groups of students, the client or the automobile distributor and the liaison, the university itself. These can be seen below in Figure 1. The agencies comprised final year; and for the most part marketing majors who would soon be seeking full-time employment and typically of bachelor-level students in this region were split evenly for gender, between the ages of 18 and 25 and ethnically mostly Indian, Pakistani, Emirati, other Arab nationals, Iranian, Australian, or Russian. The client’s role was established at the first meeting in December 2007 and they met the students for the initial briefing in week 2 of the course and then at fixed times in week 6 and 11 to answer any questions and in week 13 to review the agency presentations. There were also three media events early in the course where members of local and regional press interviewed representatives from all three stake-holder groups; and two photo-shoots where student volunteers acted as “models” for the publicity campaign within the university itself. The liaison role was mainly filled by the professor delivering the course and all correspondence between client and agencies was directed through this conduit. The liaison also co-ordinated all publicity activities with the client itself, their PR agency and creative teams.

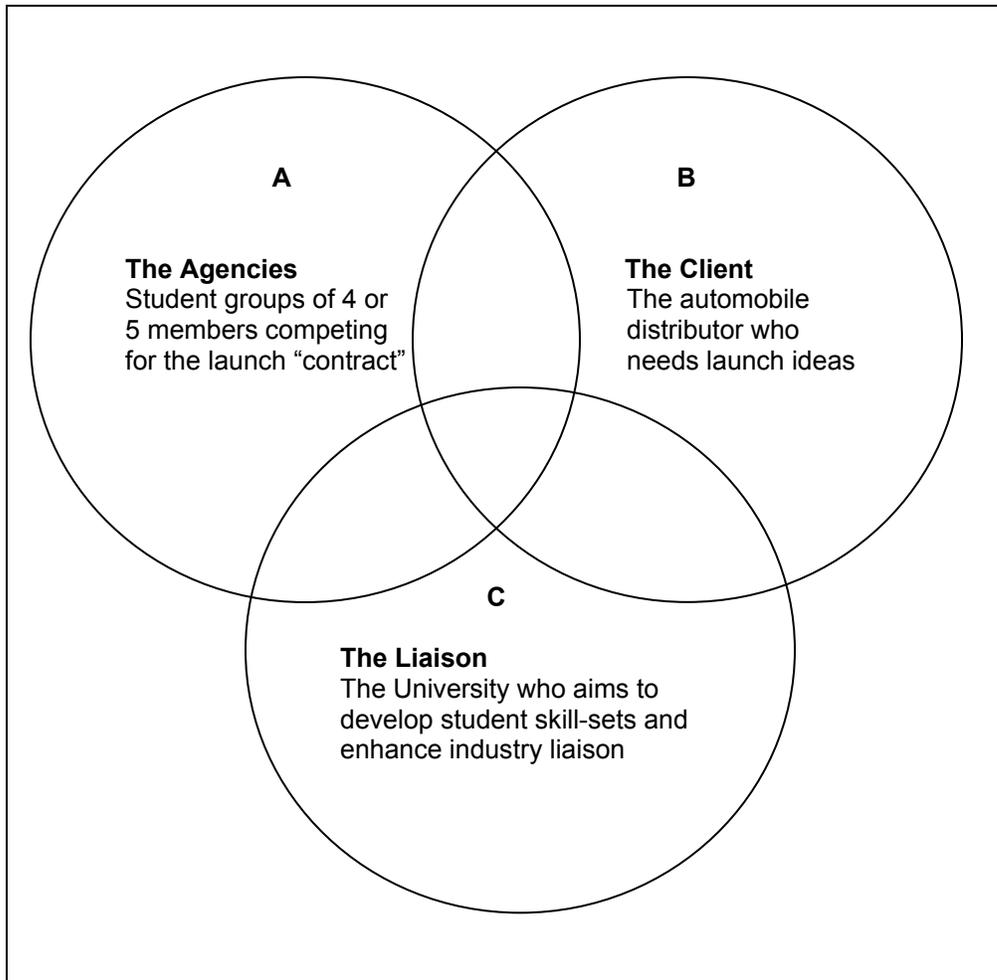


Figure 1 Stakeholders in the new car live case study

2. Background

Case studies have been used as teaching aids since business schools began, as the ability of students to analyse management problems and recommend sensible solutions may be a more relevant form of assessment than any other (Rees and Porter, 2002). The benefits of this teaching tool have long been applauded; and the most fundamental contribution by case studies has been the rationale that “active” or “participative” learning is significantly more effective than its traditional “passive” counterpart – the lecture approach (Ó Cinnéide, 2006). Case studies and in particular, the discussion they provoke, are acknowledged to provide a beneficial learning experience, since using case studies is an effective mechanism for bringing “real life” experience into the classroom, (Easton, 1982; Leenders and Erskine, 1989; Richardson et al., 1995). Furthermore business schools should develop and encourage “live” case studies where they are part of the curriculum, or develop such “live” cases as part of the curriculum where they are not (McKenna 1999).

However, to be useful in professional training, case studies must mirror the complex real-life situations workers face currently and routinely in their practice (Fallon, 1996; Gilgun, 1994; Giovinco, 1986; Hancock, 1991; Hunt and Bolen, 1984; Lowenstein and Sowell, 1992). The research context or setting is significant in that the link between practice and theory within universities should be more developed than in other organizations as academics as a theoretical resource, are also “clients” of a University’s approach in practice (Mavin et al. 2007). The minimum end product of a case discussion is an understanding of what needs to be done and how it can be accomplished. At its best, the case discussion will include an exploration of how a plan can be translated into the committed behaviour of a group of managers (Barnes et al. 1994) and with a more “hands-on” approach, training situations in which participants can be given the reins in creating, or as in this study, playing an active role in, cases themselves (Ross and Wright 2000).

In the UK, several studies (O’Brien, 1997; Williams and Owen, 1997; McLarty, 1998) were carried out to see what skills graduate employers require as part of the curriculum and thus dictating the graduate profile. Thomas and Busby (2003) further report that Hesketh’s (1999) and Dickinson’s (2000) studies suggests that there is a mismatch between the skills the employers say they want and their actual ability to recruit graduates with such skills. The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (NCIHE) reported in 1997 that all (UK) institutions should, over the medium term, identify opportunities to increase the extent to which programmes help students become familiar with work and help them reflect on such experience (NCIHE, 1997).

Thomas and Busby (2003) state that although the findings of various (UK) national studies differ in the expression of skills vocabulary, they concur that the following groups of skills are the most sought after by employers: communication, problem solving; personal and interpersonal skills; responsibility; and organisational ability. Thus, Thomas and Busby (2003) ran a series of live projects in an industry and education partnership to enable students to work with “real life” business problem situations. Their findings fell into six groups; that have been shortened for this report; roles, expectations, positive experiences, challenges presented, added value and proposed changes. It is these six groups of findings that form the basis of this study.

3. Methodology

The research aims to investigate effect on students of using a live case as part of a taught course.

The general research question and hypothesis for this research is;

- RQ Do students consider that they benefit from live case studies being used as part of the taught curriculum?
- HO: Students do not think that they benefit from live case studies being used as part of the taught curriculum
- H1: Students think that they benefit from live case studies being used as part of the taught curriculum

To look at this in more detail, each group of six questions was used to develop six sub-hypotheses based on six research questions

- RQ1 Were the students able to perform in specific roles in the live project?
H0 Students were not able to perform in specific roles in the live project
H1 Students were able to perform in specific roles in the live project
- RQ2 Did the students meet their expectations of working within a realistic business context?
HO The students did not meet their expectations of working within a realistic business context
H1 The students did meet their expectations of working within a realistic business context
- RQ3 Was the students' overall experience during the live project positive?
HO The students' overall experience during the live project was not positive
H1 The students' overall experience during the live project was positive
- RQ4 Were the students presented with unreasonable challenges during the live project?
HO The students were not presented with unreasonable challenges during the live project
H1 The students were presented with unreasonable challenges during the live project
- RQ5 Did the students gain added value through the live project?
HO The students did not gain added value through the live project
H1 The students did gain added value through the live project
- RQ6 Would the students propose changes to the live project?
HO The students would not propose changes to the live project
H1 The students would propose changes to the live project

The research was conducted in two stages. The first stage was qualitative in the form of sentence completion and this led to stage two that was a brief "exit" questionnaire. In week eight of the thirteen week programme, a representative group of sixteen out of the sixty two students enrolled (25.8%) were each given a single side A4 sheet to complete in a tutorial class. The sheet read;

Car Launch Project Individual Feedback
Complete the following sentences

- 1 Working on the Car Launch Project as part of the MARK 333 course has been ...
- 2 The best things about the Car Launch Project have been ...
- 3 The worst aspects about the Car Launch Project have been ...
- 4 When I think about presenting before the client in late April, I feel ...
- 5 I know that some of the teams will be short-listed to go to the Car Company and present their plan again to the board, I hope that ...
- 6 I feel that the media and PR involvement for the Car Launch Project has been ...
- 7 Overall the Car Launch Project, as a learning tool has been ...
- 8 In relation to the Car Launch Project I would suggest that ...

The rationale behind this was two-fold; to act as a barometer to test the student feelings about the project thus far; and to generate ideas for the major research instrument. Students were given 15 minutes to fill in the form.

From the data collected in the qualitative research and a priori studies, the main exit survey instrument was devised. Based on the excellent work of Thomas and Busby (2003) the survey was one double-sided sheet A4 with instructions and eighteen questions.

The instructions read;

Car Launch Project Exit Questionnaire

- Please complete this questionnaire honestly in relation to the car launch project
- It is completely anonymous and voluntary and will be used for research purposes and to improve the way similar projects are managed in the future
- Tick one box only, you can use pen or pencil
- Your participation in completing this questionnaire and participating in the car launch project in general is very much appreciated

The questions were divided into six groups (Thomas and Busby, 2003) of three questions; and these group headings were not shown to the students;

- A. Roles in the live project
- B. Expectations of students being involved in a live project
- C. Positive experiences during the live project
- D. Challenges presented during the live project
- E. Added value achieved through the live project
- F. Proposed changes to the live project

Groups A, B, C and E were seen as being “positives”, whereas group D was deployed to see what the students found difficult about the project and group F looked at areas for improvement and owed its genesis in the sentence completion featuring some of the frequently occurring student responses.

The questions read

1. I feel that working on the project has given me marketing experience
2. I have had the opportunity to act as a consultant to industry
3. I have been able to suggest actions based upon the findings of my research
4. I have had the chance to work within a realistic business environment
5. I have dealt with authentic business problems
6. I have been able to apply theory and knowledge within a practical context
7. I feel that I have produced a valued and tangible end-result
8. I have developed my teamwork, communication, and time management skills
9. The project has been a useful learning experience
10. I found that managing the group, especially the delegation of duties and tasks within the agency was challenging
11. Emotional involvement (frustration and social disharmony from the non-participation and lack of sharing within the group) was a challenge for me

12. The sheer quantity of work involved and time-management needed to achieve deadlines were challenging
13. The project provided an opportunity for me to use a range of skills (research, IT, communication and teamwork)
14. I have been able to develop skills valued by employers
15. I now have a better understanding of how marketing works in organisations
16. I suggest that more 3 level courses use real projects like this
17. I think that the client should provide us with more information about the product in projects like this
18. I would like to see financial or tangible incentives used in projects

Each question had the following options;

Strongly Agree	Agree	Mildly Agree	Mildly Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
<input type="checkbox"/>					

The six point scale with no neutral or N/A option was utilised as the researcher deemed every question applicable to all students and wanted a commitment of agreement or disagreement. The format and order of options (i.e. left to right descending) were similar to the end of course teaching evaluation format that had just been administered to students on all undergraduate courses. Classification questions were not used as anonymity was a priority and as a small sample was being investigated; analyses more complicated than descriptive statistics were not used.

The survey was administered in week 13 immediately after the agencies presented their pitches to the client. This was the last time, apart from the final examination, when all the students would attend at the same time; and the researcher deemed it necessary to collect a maximum sample and record the opinions of the participants right at the finale of the exercise. In the event, 61 out of 62 students enrolled completed the questionnaire yielding 60 usable responses.

Data was entered into excel and means and standard deviations were calculated, aggregated and placed in rank order, strongly agree scoring 6 and strongly disagree scoring 1.

5 Discussion

The mean score (μ) and standard deviation (σ) of each question can be seen below. The letters (A-F), indicates which group the question belongs and Table 1 below ranks (R) the scores in descending order.

The most interesting question results, as they appear in rank order, will be examined. It is pleasing to see that the statement with the highest agreement and smallest standard deviation was question A1 “I feel that working on the CLC project has given me marketing experience” as the aim of the activity was to provide full-time students with the sort of involvement that they could not normally get from the class-room. The fact that questions C9 “the project has been a useful learning experience” and E15 “I now have a

better understanding of how marketing works” yielded high scores and low standard deviations suggest that the students considered that they gained experience from the activity. In fact all “positive” questions did yield scores with a mean of over 5.4 with the exception of B5 “I have dealt with authentic business problems” and F16 “I suggest that more 3 level courses use real projects like this” and these were slightly disappointing as the exercise was intended to be as authentic as was possible and the question from F16 came out of the qualitative study.

Table 1 Ranked Order Mean Scores by Question

R	No	Question	μ	Σ
1	A 1	I feel that the project has given me marketing experience	5.73	0.48
2	C 9	The project has been a useful learning experience	5.67	0.54
3	E 15	I now have a better understanding of how marketing works	5.63	0.64
4	C 7	I feel that I have produced a valued and tangible end-result	5.58	0.62
5	E 14	I have been able to develop skills valued by employers	5.58	0.56
6	B 4	I had the chance to work within a realistic business environment	5.57	0.70
7	C 8	I developed teamwork, communication, and time management	5.55	0.59
8	F18	I would like to see financial or tangible incentives used in projects	5.52	0.62
9	E 13	The project provided an opportunity for me to use a range of skills	5.48	0.62
10	A 2	I have had the opportunity to act as a consultant to industry	5.47	0.68
11	A 3	I have been able to suggest actions based upon the findings	5.47	0.68
12	B 6	I have applied theory and knowledge within a practical context	5.45	0.65
13	D 12	The quantity of work and time-management was challenging	5.43	0.70
14	B 5	I have dealt with authentic business problems	5.38	0.72
15	F 16	I suggest that more 3 level courses use real projects like this	5.38	1.01
16	D 10	I found that managing the group, was challenging	5.32	0.77
17	F 17	I think that the client should provide us with more information	5.23	1.06
18	D 11	Emotional involvement was a challenge	5.10	1.02

What is very interesting, is that D11 “emotional involvement was a challenge” scored the lowest agreement with the second highest standard deviation. This question was put in to see how hard the students found the activity in relation to the social interaction associated with a task of this magnitude; and it was expected that it would yield a higher score indicating that the participants found it challenging. Another low score was F17 “I think that the client should provide us with more information” which was another question that came out of the qualitative research and it was pleasing to see that the lower agreement score would suggest that the client did provide sufficient information. Question D10 “I found that managing the group, was challenging” was another pleasingly lower score as it was expected that this question would feature higher up the rank. Question F18 “I would like to see financial or tangible incentives used in projects”, ranked 8 and the researcher thought it would be higher if not the highest. In fact not one participant in this project discussed the issue of prizes or remuneration, apart from the comments in the sentence completion, where this question originated.

Each group of three questions was then aggregated together to generate mean group scores (μ) and standard deviation (σ) and Table 2 below ranks (R) the scores in descending order

Table 2 Ranked Order Mean Scores by Question Groups

R	Group	Group of Questions	μ	σ
1	C	Positive experiences during the live project	5.60	0.58
2	E	Added value achieved through the live project	5.57	0.61
3	A	Roles in the live project	5.56	0.63
4	B	Expectations of students of being involved in a live project	5.47	0.69
5	F	Proposed changes to the live project	5.38	0.92
6	D	Challenges presented during the live project	5.28	0.85

From the “grouping of questions” perspective, it was pleasing to see that the highest scoring set was group C “positive experiences during the live project” followed by group E “added value achieved through the live project”. This would suggest that the participants did have positive experiences during the project and that they perceived that they acquired added value from participating. At the other end of the scale, it is pleasing to observe that the least agreed with group of statements related to group D “challenges presented during the live project” and group F “proposed changes to the live project”. This was equally interesting as the researcher put these groups in as “negatives” to see what changes the participants would suggest and what difficulties were experienced respectively. This lower agreement would suggest that the changes and challenges mooted would be minimal or at least less significant than the benefits gained.

Finally groups ABCE were ranked together to give an overall mean score of the “positives” gained from the experience and this gave an aggregated score of 5.55 with a standard deviation of 0.63. An overall mean score for all responses given for all 18 questions was 5.48 with a standard deviation of 0.73.

5 Conclusion

It must be stated that the exercise and this subsequent study were of an exploratory nature and the first of their kind executed in the University of Wollongong in Dubai. It is hoped that similar collaborations between industry and academia will take place in the near future. Overall, it can be said that at least from the perspective of the students, the project was a success; and it is hoped that time and future studies will tell the researcher that the client and liaison benefited from the process.

As a contribution to academic knowledge, at least at a local level, the study has shown that in a multi-ethnic international private university, a complex activity can operate successfully within strict time-frames and yield positive results. From the industrial side, initial reactions from the client is that they are pleased with the result and at the time of writing, are considering the best three pitches to take forwards to the final round. From the quantitative business point of view, if the client experiences a measurable increase in awareness, enquiries, sales and market share, then the activity will have been a success.

As a teaching tool, the researcher, who was also the professor for the experiment, cannot fault the activity as it motivated students in a way that was previously not seen. From the stand-point of a rigorous academic activity, it should be viewed as a pilot study for a much larger paradigm shift in the culture both of the university and local industry.

From this perspective, the sample size was selective (N60) and the methods of data collection and analysis elementary.

The author intends to carry out further research with the other stake-holder groups for this project. As stated above, the client and its agencies can be interviewed in the short-term to see what they really gained from the experience; and if data is available, sales figures can be used as an indicator of success. From the liaison or university perspective, key players in the project from the university could be similarly interviewed to see how they benefited from the activity and in the longer term, any PR from the event can be quantified and ultimately increased applications and recruitment could be partially attributed to the activity's success.

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