Achieving Relevance In Assessment Through Fieldtrips

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ABSTRACT

Students often bemoan the fact that they can't see the relevance of the report they are asked to write or the case study they have to analyze. This paper introduces the use of attending an industry tradeshow as a means of making assessment more interesting and meaningful. Much has been written about the need to bring reality back to management education and many institutions worldwide have attempted to do this through fieldtrips, simulations and case studies. This paper explains how relevance and reality can be achieved in a simple and cost effective way. Essentially postgraduate marketing students are given an assessment task which requires them to attend an industry tradeshow. Following the tradeshow they write a marketing plan and make a presentation for a company in a business-to-business marketing context. The implementation of this approach and its effect on assessment and learning outcomes is presented in this paper. Feedback from students on their experiences of the assessment task and its impact on their learning is also presented.

INTRODUCTION

As educators in marketing and management we face a constant challenge of keeping our unit of study content and assessment relevant and up-to-date. Students often bemoan the fact that they can't see the relevance of the report they are asked to write or the case study they have to analyze. Most research shows that educators in business education are conscious of the challenges faced and have worked hard to bring relevance and real life experience back to the classroom (Sutton-Brady 2006; Elam and Spotts 2004; Kennedy, Lawton and Walker 2001; Razzouk, Seitz and Rizkallah 2003; Tabor 2005; Young 2002; Zych 1997). However in one unit of study taught by the author students' of previous semesters constantly asked how, what they have learned is relevant to the "real-world" situation. In order to bring relevance and reality to the learning experience for these students it was decided to incorporate a field trip into the unit of study Business Marketing. The aim of the fieldtrip was to show the students a trade show in action and allow them to more effectively prepare a marketing plan for a company in a business-to-business setting.

To begin this paper outlines the context in which this fieldtrip and assessment task was implemented. It provides a rationale for introducing this Tradeshow assessment task based on an investigation of the existing literature on the use of fieldtrips and the need as identified by the author. Utilizing the available theory the fieldtrip and resultant assessment task is introduced. How the approach was developed and implemented is explained in detail. Finally feedback from students to provided highlighting the success of the fieldtrip approach in this unit of study.

WHY A FIELDTRIP?

The tradeshow assignment was introduced in the unit of study Business Marketing, a postgraduate level elective taught at a leading Australian University. Business marketing is concerned with the marketing of products and services to other businesses and institutions. The unit aims to develop students into more complete marketers, capable of operating in the dynamic business marketing environment. Within the unit a combination of assessment tasks are used, these include a marketing plan and presentation, class participation and a final exam.

The initial impetus for revamping the assessment and approach to learning in this unit of study was feedback from students in previous semesters. The student feedback showed the need to show relevancy and they especially wanted to see how what they were doing would work in the real-world. Additionally having taught B2B marketing for a number of years I wanted to remove the consumer marketing blinkers from the students. I had found that many of them approached the task of completing a B2B marketing plan in the same way they would a marketing plan for consumer goods and in many cases missed the nuances of B2B marketing.

In developing this assessment task, the aim was to establish the relevance and real life application of the concepts they were learning and at the same time assess the learning outcomes of the unit of study effectively, while exposing them to as many concepts in B2B marketing as possible. The challenge was to achieve this in a feasible way, without incurring additional costs for the students and too much additional time for both lecturer and students. My first thought was to try and set up live case studies for them, i.e. have them prepare the plan for a local company since research has shown how this can work effectively (Kennedy et al 2001). However in my past experience this approach has proven to be problematic and very time-consuming to manage. It is also difficult to get companies involved on an on-going basis. I then thought about taking them on a fieldtrip to see business in action. I have taught on MBA programs where this approach tends to work very well, however I wanted something that would directly tie into their assessment task and just couldn't find a way of linking it by just visiting a company. So given the nature of the assignment and the fact that previously students missed the concept of using trade media when designing their marketing communications plans in a B2B context, it was decided to take them to a trade show.

No literature specifically addressing the use of tradeshow for fieldtrips was found to support the decision made. However a review of the literature on fieldtrips provided evidence to show that experiential learning through fieldtrips was very effective in improving the learning outcomes of students. Jakubowski (2003) reflects that students have expressed a strong interest in applying their classroom knowledge and that fieldtrips are effective in achieving this. She also strongly highlights the need for immersion in learning as do other authors (Pearce and Sutton-Brady 2003). Many authors posit the need for hand-on experience in business education (Granitz 2001) and it has been shown that field trips are a way of achieving this. While much has been written about getting out in the field and providing real experiences for students (Alvarez and Rogers 2006), some authors caution how to use this approach. Kisiel (2005) found that while the stated motivation of educators is to support what they are teaching in class often the links are weak. The motivation for undertaking fieldtrips revolves around improved learning outcomes and does require careful planning to tie it in with what is being taught in class. Successful fieldtrips are those integrated into the class and are essential not auxiliary and "a strong connection between the fieldtrip and the curriculum allows students to not remember what they did, but why they did it" (Kisiel 2006).

In light of the literature in preparing for this fieldtrip I was careful to make sure students would be able to see its' connection with what they were learning in class. Indeed I took it one step further and integrated it into their assessment thereby aiming to give them relevance and an opportunity to immerse themselves in the reality.

THE TRADESHOW

The tradeshow chosen for students to attend was CeBIT held in May each year in Sydney. Although this tradeshow was chosen because of its' convenient location and timing it is also one of the leading Information Technology tradeshow held in the region. It attracts over 30,000 visitors and 720 exhibitors.

"CeBIT Australia is Australasia's leading Information & Communications Technology (ICT) event for the business marketplace and covers the entire spectrum of technology and the key elements that make up the ICT products and services marketplace. This is the only Australian event where you can exhibit your products and services to a large and high level audience of business decision makers and buyers – keen to see the latest and greatest solutions available." (<http://www.cebit.com.au/main/about/index.asp>)

Importantly the tradeshow organisers were very supportive of our fieldtrip and allowed us all to register and attend free of charge. The only conditions they placed on us were that we would all attend on the same day and that I would be present at all times. They also warned us that no photography is permitted within the Show. Each

student was required to register him/herself as a visitor. This was done online on the trade show website. University policy and insurance terms also meant that a list of students attending the show was presented to the university prior to students attending.

Students were given guidelines as to the conduct expected of them at the Trade Show. They were told to keep their entry pass visibly displayed at all times. An important point made was that they must realise that the Trade Show is held for business purposes, and that the companies exhibiting there have invested a lot of money to participate and meet customers, suppliers etc. They were therefore relying on the goodwill of exhibiting companies in providing time and attention to the student. Accordingly, students were informed to conduct themselves professionally and sensitively at all times, not unreasonably exploit exhibitors' resources (eg one brochure per group, not a handful of the same one), not interrupt exhibitors when they are engaged in business activity, and at all times display a high standard of courtesy, awareness and commonsense. Students were also told to dress reasonably smartly.

THE TRADESHOW ASSIGNMENT

The students were in the first lecture given very clear instructions on how to approach the tradeshow assignment. In order to complete this project it was compulsory for them to attend the CeBIT show on assigned day with me. Students were formed in to groups of three as this was a team-based assessment. The aim of the project was to develop a marketing promotional plan for an IT (Information technology) company with the emphasis on how they would achieve sales targets to industry buyers by using trade media. Working in groups they had to prepare the plan and present it in class at the end of the semester. The presentation accounted for 10% of the overall marks in the unit of study and it was not to exceed 30 minutes. The plan, which was submitted at the time of the presentation accounted for 25% of their marks. They were assessed on the basis of the research completed, evidence of effective and efficient research in trade show promotion, use of the trade show as a learning tool, an understanding of the underlying financial costs, and knowledge of the market in which you are 'operating'. The teams were instructed to produce a realistic marketing promotion plan for a hypothetical new product detailing how you would achieve sales targets to wine industry buyers by using trade media.

The project aimed to:

- Provide students with experience in industry marketing media: trade magazines and trade shows;
- Encourage students to combine an understanding of concepts from several areas of Business marketing, such as marketing communications, organisational buyer behaviour, budgeting, pricing and breakeven analysis;
- Gain insights into the skills, knowledge and techniques needed to construct a marketing plan promoting a product to business buyers.

Students needed to undertake some elementary research on the IT companies and their products, view and consider companies' marketing efforts at the trade show, understand other methods and channels of trade marketing communications, study the financial basis of the company in relation to its marketing efforts. While visiting the show, observe and visit exhibitors' stands to see how they design, establish and present themselves. Observe the promotional activities they engage in, both for corporate promotion and for other purposes (eg conference sponsorship, awards etc).

Each group were then to prepare a report displaying the knowledge acquired and insights gained. The report had a word limit of 2,000 words. Sources of information including interviews, referenced sources, company and product literature, business cards and other relevant material had to be attached as appendices. The group could choose how their report was structured, but were told it should represent a realistically business like response to their corporate superior's memo (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Memo to students

ACME Corp. Ltd.	
MEMO	
Date:	xx/xx/xxxx
From:	Caoimhe Marketing Director
To:	Oisín Assistant Manager, Market Development
RE:	NEW PRODUCT LAUNCH

Dear Oisín,

Since you have been instrumental in developing our new product, I would like you to lead your team in preparing a marketing plan for the launch to the trade of this exciting addition to our product range.

I shall be presenting your submission to the other divisional directors at our annual planning and forecasting retreat on Hamilton Island in June, and since they are not from your division your report will have to include data on market size, demand and trends for the domestic market for this product.

Your marketing strategies will need to recognise how our business customers differ in their characteristics and purchasing behaviour for this product, from the usual industry buyers?

I note that the CeBIT Trade Show is on again at Darling Harbour. I would like you to visit the show and assess it as the venue for the product launch in September 2007. Particularly, how do our competitors manage their marketing there, what presence should we have, what will it cost us, what exposure will we get, what promotional initiatives might we use to gain recognition? And you probably should include suggested personnel requirements (and the costs of these in the budget) as HR will be sure to question allocation of staff during the exhibition period.

Even if the trade show is the launch location, we will still need to use complementary media. Please plan for this too: show what media you would use to reach the target market, advertising type and frequency, continuity and scheduling, cost and so on.

Naturally I'll be questioned about the launch costs, so include a budget detailing total promotional expenditures. Your budgeted costs will have to be set against target sales for the first 12 months, so that everyone can see the volume necessary to break even, given the assumption that we'll recover all the launch costs within the first year. The choice of price level for the product is yours, but it must be competitive with our main competitors.

Based on the price you set, and hence the gross margin you achieve, your budget must of course be consistent with your cost structure and recognise your ongoing marketing support for the other products that your division produces, and your division's current sales.

Regards,

Caoimhe

FINDINGS

The day of the fieldtrip was a great success. Students had done a lot of homework in preparing for it and came armed with a number of questions for the exhibitors. Their behaviour at all times was professional and the showed great enthusiasm for learning as much as they could by attending the seminars which were scheduled

throughout the day. I had told them that they would need to stay for up to 3 hours to gain the maximum benefit of attending, but 6 hours later many of them were still there.

The standard of their reports and presentation was perhaps the most pleasing outcome. Unlike in previous semesters when students applied a consumer marketing approach to their plan these students grasped and displayed the concepts way more effectively. They particularly showed a great understanding of the major differences in running a marketing communications campaign in a B2B context. They again unlike their predecessors had an exceptional understanding of the time and costs involved in using a tradeshow as a medium for promoting their products.

The written feedback received from students could be clustered in a number of themes. The first and overriding theme to emerge was their enjoyment of the experience, some student comments in support of this include *"I enjoyed the experience"*, *"it was a great experience"*, *"a wonderful experience"* *"an unforgettable experience"*.

Secondly students emphasised the practicality and real life experience of attending the tradeshow. *"Great for a hands on glimpse of business marketing"*, *Rather than sitting at home and imagining what exhibitors should do at the show I gained the knowledge from real experience by observing what the exhibitors were doing"*, *We got to talk to exhibitors, this was invaluable"*, *"gave us ideas we otherwise may not have thought about"*, *"attending the show and experiencing the marketing activities in person was far more effective than hearing about it in lectures"*, *"great to get a close-up view of how real companies promote their products and communicate with their customers"*, *"allowed me to gain a realistic view of how B2B differs from B2C"*, *"this was a real life example that I haven't gained in other units"*. Overall almost every student made some comment about the real-life experience which ties in with the rationale from the literature for undertaking fieldtrips.

Finally students commented on the relevance of the assessment task and how the fieldtrip allowed them to see that relevance. *"The assessment was an excellent opportunity to work on a project that had direct relevant connection to future work activities"*, *"The assignment allowed us to engage in different marketing tasks and I could see these were relevant at the show"*, *it was an interactive way of learning and allowed me to see how the components of the plan are relevant for business"*, *"the assessment provided me an opportunity to connect the knowledge from the classes to the real world practise"*. These comments show that one of the main reasons for implementing this assessment task and fieldtrip was indeed achieved.

Students also mentioned that the interactive nature allowed *"more creativity"*, helped them *"work better in teams"* and ensured they *"were not bored"* and that they saw it as *"meaningful"*.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has shown how to successfully implement an experiential learning approach in a real life setting. It provides an approach which not only gives students the relevance and reality they often desire, but is also positively received by students. Student feedback was universally positive and all highlighted the enjoyment of attending and the fact that it was a very practical way to learn. It highlights the improved learning outcomes for students. It also proves that by immersing students in their learning experience, they become enthusiast active learners who ultimately take away a lot more from the unit of study than they would if traditional non-experiential methods were used. From the educators point of view it is an easy task to undertake such a fieldtrip and while it does require some planning it is not overly onerous.

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