

The 4 Ps of Designing a Marketing Course with Disney

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Introduction

Marketing educators value active learning as a means for students to integrate and apply new marketing knowledge rather than simply memorize information for an exam (Karns, 1993). Field site visits, or interacting with companies on location and seeing how professionals use business concepts, are often well received learning activities and have been described as learning in action (Castleberry, 2007). Consequently, students are better able to transfer the marketing knowledge they've acquired in class to a work setting when they've seen how the knowledge fits into business during an on-site experience (Ramocki, 2007).

By using The Walt Disney Company, a recognized leader in entertainment, theme park experiences, and technology (Lev-Ram, 2014), as an active learning case study and extended field trip, courses can be designed to meet course objectives in Services Marketing, Tourism Marketing, and Consumer Behavior. The course objectives can be met through the 4 Ps of Designing Courses with Disney: Product, the course content; Price, an open range with descriptions of what you get for your money; Place, where the course fits within a curriculum as well as which elements can be successfully taught on campus and which should be taught on property; Promo, examples of successful word of mouth and social media efforts used. While examples of on-campus learning are addressed, the heart of this manuscript is a set of best practices in preparing a travel course that uses the active learning of a field site visit to Walt Disney World to demonstrate marketing-specific topics.

Product--the course content

The Magic Kingdom theme park is the most visited theme park in the world and its recent investment of over \$1 billion on its innovative MagicBand ecosystem has allowed guests to spend less time waiting in line, are experiencing more in the theme parks, remember more of their vacation, and consequently, are spending more money (FastCompany, 2014; Kuang, 2015; Mauney, 2015).

This blend of technology and unrivaled guest service provide a platform for course development that allows students to interact with the iconic Disney brand.

Students have the opportunity to become immersed in the Disney experience through intentionally designed activities which engage the students prior to travel, on location, and upon return through appropriate reflection. Through the use of the *My Disney Experience* website and mobile app, students can participate in the planning of the field trip through researching dining options, attractions and selecting FastPass+ reservations. Consideration for assignment design should include S.M.A.R.T. objectives that must be achieved in the theme parks such as: interviewing cast members, locating hidden Mickeys, or scavenger hunts. The addition of special group tours is an effective way to provide students with behind-the-scenes access to Disney property. These intentionally designed activities heighten students' senses and contribute to the overall understanding of how the operations and magic happens within the theme parks.

Price--fitting the trip to the wallet

A common misconception is that a trip to Walt Disney World is beyond the financial reach of most. The popular Orlando resort offers pricing options that fit into the categories of value, moderate, or deluxe. Disney's price categories can be translated to fit the financial abilities of the course objectives. An example template for a moderately-priced experience follows, based on four-days and four-nights, providing building blocks of customization for each course's particular needs.

Staying on Disney property comes with amenities that the nearby hotels cannot offer such as Extra Magic Hours which allows access to theme parks prior to official opening or after official park closing. As of January 2016, the average cost, including taxes, for a studio villa at Old Key West Resort during low peak seasons such as January or before spring break, is approximately \$140 per night. A 4-day Park Hopper ticket, which allows access to all four theme parks, can be obtained for \$391 through the authorized third-party ticket reseller, UndercoverTourist.com. Linked to the Magic Band, a Disney Dining Plan can help students budget for food expenses by paying a fixed price per day. For instance, a Quick Service meal plan which includes two counter service meals and a snack is approximately \$45 per night when paired with a resort reservation. Depending on the distance, instructors will need to determine if driving a university-owned vehicle or booking an airfare is more cost effective. If travelling by air, Disney's Magical Express provides free transportation and luggage service between the resort and the Orlando International Airport.

Instructors can add value to the student experience by including a behind-the-scenes tour such as the Keys to the Kingdom tour in the Magic Kingdom, which costs approximately \$80 per person and lasts about four hours. The tour exposes students to the purpose of theming and its connection to Walt Disney's vision and creativity. Additional highlights include backstage access to parade staging, attractions, and the underground tunnel system. Adding additional experiences, such as a tour, exposes

students to how Disney delivers an outstanding guest experience and to unique opportunities not found in the typical visit to Walt Disney World.

For those with ample budgetary support, the Disney Institute provides half-day to day-long sessions with certified trainers and Disney leadership to instruct the class on key Disney insights for success on topics ranging from leadership to customer service. The Disney Institute is the executive training unit that involves both classroom and theme park experiences. These services can cost up to \$24,000 for a full-day class or \$14,000 for a half-day class of up to 25 participants.

An important part to the cost considerations is understanding the makeup of the class and the financial abilities of the students. Successful course design and budgeting use conservative estimates. Furthermore, travel budgets should include almost all of the student's expenses upfront to alleviate the need for additional out-of-pocket expenses when onsite. Faculty should be mindful to include the cost of their own travel in the overall trip cost as well.

Placement--where the course fits in the curriculum

The Disney Institute offers four categories of courses (Leadership Excellence, Employee Engagement, Quality Service, and Business excellence) that would proudly sit in any B-school curriculum (<https://disneyinstitute.com/courses/>). However, when you consider that Walt Disney World is the world's most visited entertainment resort, has established the gold standard of customer service (Nanton and Dicks, 2013) as part of a parent company, Walt Disney Corp., and has a commitment to innovation in technology, it becomes clear that professors can design Disney-themed courses that easily fit the typical learning objectives of marketing curriculum stalwarts like Branding, Tourism Marketing, Services Marketing, and Creativity and Design. As many marketing curricula grow to include a focus on digital and social media, the Walt Disney World's MyMagic+ program fits into nascent and topical marketing courses.

Trade books exist, like *Be Our Guest: Perfecting the Art of Customer Service* by the Disney Institute (2001) and *The Customer Rules: The 39 Essential Rules for Delivering Sensational Service* (2013) by Lee Cockerell that are ideal for courses in Services Marketing and Tourism Marketing. *Be Our Guest* outlines Disney's guidelines for guest service and Disney's focus on Quality Service. *The Customer Rules* is based on Lee Cockerell's decades of experience in Hilton and Marriott Hotels as well as Disney resorts beginning with "Rule #1: Customer service is not a department" (p. 1). Finally, a non-Disney centered book, *Romancing the Brand: How Brands Create Strong, Intimate Relationships with Consumers* by Tim Halloran (2014) provides accessible descriptions of how brands, like Disney, are built and maintained. *Romancing the Brand* is a fit for any course with a focus on branding or brand loyalty.

Promo--word of mouth and social media

When providing students an opportunity to use Walt Disney World as a mobile classroom, word-of-mouth promotion has proven effect. Student enthusiasm allows them to act as course evangelists in a way that is rare in relation to standard courses in the curriculum. In that vein, incorporating social media assignments while touring Walt Disney World encourages that word-of-mouth promotion as each student's network of friends and online connections can see (and hear), in real time, what active learning with Disney magic looks (and sounds) like.

Conclusion

Creating a travel course to Walt Disney World is likely to be met with skepticism as only "an opportunity for play." However, using this globally recognized leader in entertainment as a live business case showcases an effective use of emerging technologies to encompass the 4 Ps and support marketing course objectives. Intentional design choices can be made to make this an affordable travel course for students while providing them a venue to experience the Disney brand first-hand.

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Keywords: *Walt Disney World, field trip, active learning, marketing education, information technology*

Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and Practitioners: This paper is useful in planning extended field trips to Walt Disney World where students can connect theory to practice through active learning.

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TRACK: Marketing Education