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# Engaging Students through a Virtual Live Case

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**Abstract** - Students are motivated to engage in their education when they understand how mastery of course content will translate to practical skills needed in the job market. In marketing education, live cases often are used to help students make a clear connection between course content and its application to real-world business problems. There are times, however, when a live case is not feasible or available. For these circumstances, the author has developed an innovative approach which approximates a live case. The approach combines components of a live case with historical analysis to have students perform an in-depth market strategy analysis of an industry in real-time.

**Keywords** - historical analysis, live case, marketing strategy, real-time learning, student engagement

**Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and/or Practitioners** - Research has shown that students are more engaged in their classes when they feel the material directly relates to practical skills they will need in the job market. It is possible to engage students, by having them assume the duties of a brand manager who must respond to changing market conditions in real-time, even when a live case is not available.

## Introduction

The overriding objective of a capstone marketing strategy course is to have students move from knowledge of the individual components of marketing, such as product development, pricing, communications and distribution, to integrated solutions to real-world marketing problems. The challenge for instructors is to determine the most effective means of meeting this objective in a way that brings real-world context to the classroom, while engaging students as active learners who share responsibility for the learning process.

## Student Motivation for Engagement

Students have identified their motivation for actively engaging in courses related to their major as wanting to be successful in future employment (Taylor et al., 2007). It follows then, that learning activities that simulate the types of job responsibilities students will face in the work world would be highly valued. Perhaps that is why studies have shown that students find live-case projects to be among the most stimulating course activities (Karns, 2005).

Taylor et al. recommend a variety of strategies to increase student engagement in marketing courses. Strategies include: making clear and consistent linkages between class materials/activities and future professional roles and intellectual growth; increasing the use of active learning activities such as class presentations which require physical activity; increasing the use of interactivity in learning through discussion and team processes; and increasing the level of personalization in pedagogy by building rapport with students.

Traditionally, marketing courses have relied on the use of case studies and research projects to engage students, by adding real-world context to the classroom. With a case study students are given all the background information for a business problem, whereas students must gather and organize their own information for a research project. To enhance student engagement and learning, cases can be supplemented with projects that consist of either a live case for a client or historical analysis of a business problem. The author has developed an innovative approach which combines the features of historical analysis and a live case to enable students to assume the duties of a brand manager.

## Student Engagement through Historical Analysis

What is historical analysis and how is it relevant to the study of marketing? In general terms, historical study is used to gain an understanding of the roots of a discipline and patterns of change over time (Savitt, 1980). Historical research contains both descriptive and analytical components. Savitt states that it begins with a narration of events in a time sequence, while analysis seeks to examine the relationships and consequences of those events. While historians seek to gain a better understanding of past events by reconciling conflicting information, Nevett (1991) points out that for marketers the understanding is not an end in itself. Rather, it forms the foundation of future marketing strategy. Golder (2000) posits that historical analysis can provide scientific knowledge of marketing phenomena that is currently useful, rather than simply providing a narrative of the past, and that a key

principle of the historical method is that all evidence must be examined critically or skeptically.

Historical analysis is an approach which requires students to be active participants in the learning process. It positions students as detectives (Bussiere, 2005) who employ historical analysis to work backwards to determine the environment within which business events occurred. This information then is used to determine future marketing strategy.

As Bussiere explains, with historical research students must collect their own data with an eye toward determining what happened in the past. Historical analysis requires students to develop creative data collection skills and learn to critically evaluate the data itself, as well as their sources. They must synthesize the disparate sources and apply marketing theory to form conclusions. Bussiere points out that historical analysis adds to skills students previously developed through lectures, text readings, computer simulations and case studies, by making them responsible for providing the narrative. Use of historical analysis enhances student learning, by providing these added dimensions in data collection, critical evaluation of data, and sources and synthesis of information

## **Student Engagement through Live Case Study**

A live case approach (Elam and Spotts, 2004) differs from traditional case studies, as it provides students with a hands-on work experience in which they serve as consultants who must apply various business concepts learned in the classroom to an actual business problem. Students must interact with each other, the instructor, and company representatives, mirroring real-world work experiences where employees must integrate and coordinate work efforts. Live cases enhance student learning by providing realistic situations where the outcome is not known in advance and the required course of action not always clear. Students learn to deal with the uncertainty and complexities that arise from synthesizing incomplete and sometimes contradictory information.

Elam and Spotts offered a unique teaching innovation, by using a live case to integrate projects for three distinct marketing classes and having students work as consultants for a local business. Teams of students in a Marketing Management course each developed a marketing plan for a local business. Students in a Campaign Planning course served as their ad agencies and created a promotional campaign plan to correspond with each marketing plan. The artwork for the campaign was created by a graphic design team in a Desktop Publishing course.

While the innovation presented by Elam and Spotts offers many benefits, it may not be possible to implement in all situations. Scheduling classes to meet simultaneously to facilitate the ability of students and instructors to work together presents challenges. Although it certainly is possible to use a live case with only one section of one course, there still would be a need to train students and schedule periodic meetings with business owners.

In the marketing strategy course the author works with students so they can develop the skills utilized by a brand manager who must consider a range of issues impacting an entire industry, including competitive pressures and changing market conditions. To capture these details in a live case would require simultaneously working with several local businesses in direct competition with each other. The competitors would have to identify a need for solution of a similar business problem which meets the learning objectives for the course. Logistically, this objective would be very difficult to meet, especially for schools in

areas that do not have a market area sufficient to support many industry competitors. Even when industry competitors do exist in a market area, they may not be willing to share sensitive business data with students. It can be difficult to find even one business with an applicable business problem that is willing to participate in such a project.

## **Student Engagement through Immersion In A Virtual Live Case**

This paper describes a capstone undergraduate marketing strategy course designed to maximize students' engagement, as they work in teams to assume the duties of a brand manager of a real-world automotive brand/model for a semester. In the real-world, the role of a brand manager includes a heavy analytical component with duties including the in-depth examination of brand history data and prices over time. A brand manager also makes recommendations on promotions campaigns and brand positioning. The virtual live case approach requires students to perform this same type of analysis and make recommendations on product changes, pricing issues and promotions.

A crucial distinction of the virtual live case approach is the way in which it mirrors an actual live case project which requires students to respond to actual business problems as they occur in real-time, as opposed to hypothetical problems presented in a computer simulation or past events in a case study where the results are known in advance. Students experiencing the virtual live case use historical analysis to study the past, while simultaneously evaluating whatever contemporaneous business problems unfold for the assigned model and overall industry.

To execute the virtual live case approach, the instructor divides students into teams of four students. Each team is required to complete a semester-long brand strategy analysis of a different automotive brand/model. Assigning a specific brand/model to each team allows students to take ownership and focus their energies on micro-level data for their brand.

Each student within the team prepares an individual brand strategy analysis corresponding to one of the four required project components (components 1-4) listed in Table 1. All team members then work together to develop recommendations (component 5) relative to their analyses.

The instructor conducts a series of workshops to prepare teams for their role as brand manager. Workshop topics correspond to the project components in Table 1 and are conducted throughout the semester, forming the framework for the entire course. Students work together during in-class workshops, as well as outside class time, to integrate their individual case analyses and recommendations to form a composite semester project for their brand. They modify their analyses, as they come to appreciate the complexities of the interplay between the four project components for their brand and changing market conditions as they occur in real-time throughout the semester.

The workshops simultaneously teach the marketing concepts needed for students to develop their analyses, while guiding them in the use of historical analysis to gather data, analyze marketing problems and consider strategic alternatives in the assigned industry. With in-depth study of multiple competitors in real-time over the semester students become "experts" in the industry and approximate the experience of a brand manager who must integrate historical data, current data and business issues as they unfold to analyze fully the business environment.

**Table 1. Brand Strategy Analysis Requirements**

1. Environmental Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General Tracking Strategy</li> <li>• Economic Trends</li> <li>• Demographic/Lifestyle Changes</li> <li>• Emerging Technologies</li> <li>• Legislative Initiatives</li> <li>• Evaluation of Key Competitors (company level)</li> </ul>
2. Customer Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Market Structure (US market size and general breakdown)</li> <li>• Identification of Segments</li> <li>• Complete Model of the Decision-Making Process</li> </ul>
3. Product and Price Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Model of the Competitive Set</li> <li>• Product Design Attributes</li> <li>• Detailed Price Levels</li> <li>• Positioning of your Brand vs. Key Competitors</li> </ul>
4. Communications and Distribution Programs Analysis	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Short-Term Programs:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dealer-Sponsored Advertising (for all media)</li> <li>• Dealer/Manufacturer-Sponsored Incentive Programs</li> <li>• Manufacturer to Dealer Incentive Programs</li> </ul> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Long Term Programs:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Manufacturer-Sponsored Advertising (for all media options)</li> <li>• Manufacturer/Dealer-Sponsored Support Programs</li> <li>• Quality Assurance Programs</li> </ul>
5. Marketing Strategy Recommendations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Brand Strategy</li> <li>• Target Market</li> <li>• Positioning</li> <li>• Marketing Mix</li> </ul>

## Industry Immersion

As a starting point, it is crucial to select a topic that deals with contemporary business issues that students will be familiar with either through personal experience or the popular press. For example, while most students can relate to consumer products such as automobiles, not all students would have the technical background needed to make the aerospace industry equally relevant. Without relevancy students will not be able to immerse themselves sufficiently in an industry to approach the role of a brand manager.

To effectively implement the workshop approach the instructor first must immerse himself in the chosen industry. Intimate knowledge of an industry over time is required to integrate the current business environment with its historical underpinnings. Such knowledge allows the instructor to guide students in data acquisition that reaches beyond typical sources on the web or in the press, so they also can begin to immerse themselves in the industry.

Prior to assigning brands, it is crucial for the instructor to ensure that sufficient data is available for students. Immersion in an industry makes the instructor intimately familiar with the types of resources available. For their projects students were directed to automotive trade publications, as well as more unusual sources. For example, Edmonston's book *Lemon-Aid* (2005) which deals with used cars and minivan's in the Canadian market became a useful supplement to the American-based *Consumer Reports* articles. Engineering and service publications also became relevant data sources. The instructor also ordered various books dealing with the automotive industry for the school library, to supplement its periodical and journal resources.

## Real-Time Learning and the Virtual Live Case

Several situations illustrate the importance of industry immersion and how student learning is enhanced when experienced in real-time. When studying an industry in real-time, neither the instructor nor students knows exactly where the project will lead. The instructor, as well as students, must respond to actual market conditions as they occur. The following issues that arose while teaching marketing strategy during the 2005-2012 academic years illustrate this point.

Being immersed in the automotive industry led the instructor to know that there was a distinct possibility that Ford would be restyling and renaming the Mercury Montego and Ford Freestyle as the Mercury Sable and Ford Taurus, respectively. These models were assigned to one group of students to require them to deal with the real-world complications that accompany such a change. When Ford announced the change part-way through the semester, the student Ford team had to incorporate the history of the Taurus/Sable with the market realities of the Freestyle/Montego. They had to consider Ford's reasons for making the change and what the marketing implications would be.

The entire class learned from this change, as discussions at the class level incorporate the experiences of each of the individual teams. The ability of an instructor to anticipate these types of product cancellations and remakes and to guide student learning requires detailed knowledge and expertise in the industry. It is crucial to follow industry sources such as *Automotive News* to keep abreast of events as they occur and add realism to the classroom.

Another example of how real-time study enhances student learning can be found in the study of Chevrolet SUVs vs. Toyota minivans. Two teams were assigned Chevrolet and Toyota brand vehicles. As a result of immersion in the industry, the instructor was familiar with current marketing campaigns for the two brands, as well as the fact that Toyota was putting forth new entries into the full-size pick-up truck market traditionally dominated by U.S. manufacturers.

Toyota had launched a campaign emphasizing how much U.S. content was in its vehicles. At the same time, Chevrolet launched a campaign for its trucks that focused on patriotic sentiment and linked its trucks to various moments of historic importance in the U.S. over the past 45 years. Although the Chevrolet and Toyota teams were not assigned trucks, they had to consider how the advertising campaign battle impacted their assigned models.

Consideration of this battle led to a discussion of the history of U.S. market supremacy in trucks. Students learned to consider why Toyota's entry into the full-size pick-up truck market was so threatening viewed in an historical context. They came to understand that the strength of the overall brand obviously would impact the success of the model assigned to their teams. As students considered the impact, the entire class became involved in the consideration of other real-time issues including factory closings, ethical treatment of employees, and government regulations.

As part of this discussion, students had to consider the domestic content of the brands assigned to their groups. Since this data is not published, students had to check the stickers on new automobiles at dealerships to collect their own data through observation in real-time. This type of experience helps students to exercise creativity in data collection and appreciate that all relevant information is not always readily available.

A third example of the impact of real-time issues involves a controversy which developed between General Motors and Ford Motor Company regarding which company sold the most vehicles during 2005. Automotive News (Krolicki, 2006; Lapham, 2006; Teahen, 2006) reported the following sales for 2005 based on 2 sources: sales reported by automakers and vehicle registration data compiled by R.L. Polk & Company.

	Sales Reported by Automakers	Registrations Reported by R.L. Polk & Co.
Chevrolet	2,651,124	2,624,538
Ford	2,634,041	2,630,110

Depending on the source quoted, it appears that both companies could claim bragging rights to being the number one brand in America. To determine how a simple number could become so complicated, several issues must be considered. First, sales data from automakers are self-reported based on deliveries of new cars and light trucks to customers. As opposed to self-reported data, Polk data includes new car and truck registrations. Also, there is a time lag between the actual registration of a vehicle and when it is recorded which may result in a vehicle registered in late 2005 not being recorded officially until early 2006. This led to a good discussion of what other issues could potentially impact the reporting of sales data, if such simple numbers can be so complicated.

Students probably would have been exposed to the GM and Ford ads which appeared in the popular press (television and print ads in magazines) at the time. A small footnote on



the ads states the basis for their claims. This example demonstrates the importance of critically evaluating both the sources of data and the evidence itself, by having students consider what numbers GM and Ford's claims are based on. They learn how to research the numbers themselves to corroborate the claims. They come to consider whether the sources have a bias in presenting the data, as well as possible motives of GM and Ford in presenting the information in a particular way. Students learn that it is not sufficient to accept GM or Ford's claims at face value. They learn how to go beyond the popular press, evaluate sources and data critically, and analyze and interpret the evidence.

Class discussion of a similar situation which transpired during the Spring 2013 semester reinforces the importance of these issues. An article by Alisa Priddle (2013) in the *Detroit Free Press* referenced a report based on Polk data which indicated that the Ford Focus was number 1 in global car sales for 2012. At the same time Ohnsman and Trudell (2013) reported in *Bloomberg News* that Toyota disputed that report, based on internal data for Corolla sales.

Analyzing the industry in real-time creates a virtual live case, by requiring students to deal with changing market conditions as they happen, rather than simply analyzing past market performance. Ford's decision to rename its vehicles, exploration of the competition between Toyota and General Motors in full-size trucks, and the use of data to enhance a brand's reputation are just a few examples of how real-time analysis enhances student learning. The historical analysis workshops deal with these types of issues and are instrumental in enabling students to work together to integrate marketing concepts from the text with their brands' historical context and the challenges the brands face for the future.

## Workshops and the Virtual Live Case

Capstone marketing courses many times include a major marketing campaign project for which the members of each team work together, but independently of other teams in the class. The virtual live case approach uses workshops to foster interactivity both within and among teams.

During bi-weekly workshops the instructor poses questions designed to highlight the brand/model contrasts. On a broad level, discussion can revolve around general categories such as SUV's compared to minivans. However, each team responds based on its own brand/model and more detailed differences among competing brands/models relative to size, form, brand heritage and mechanical design become apparent. There is a designed synergy in having students work simultaneously on competing models in real-time, and workshop discussions across teams allow this synergy to become a learning tool. Discussions are more realistic because multiple competitors are represented simultaneously by the various teams, just as they would be in the real-world at trade conferences.

With a live case students would have industry professionals to consult with. For the virtual live case, industry immersion through historical analysis and interactivity within and among teams serve as a substitute. In effect, the brand analyses become a series of live cases students respond to in real-time, and teams become "experts" for their brand. The instructor, having been immersed in the industry, conducts workshops and takes on the role of a manager who guides and advises students in a live case project. At the same time, students become immersed in the overall industry, rather than simply becoming knowledgeable about their own brand/model.

### *Workshop Example*

Each workshop presents an instructor-developed case designed to cover the particular marketing concepts needed to complete the brand strategy analyses as specified previously in Table 1. Students explore questions following each case through the use of historical analysis and/or real-time data collection and analysis. They then progress to using these techniques to perform the brand strategy analyses for their team's assigned model, while simultaneously considering the real-time issues impacting their brand and the automotive industry overall. By the end of the semester, each team is able to synthesize its analyses into a coherent team project.

Some workshop topics include communications and distribution analysis, customer and product and price analysis, critical evaluation of data, and interpretation of primary research. The details of workshops used for any given semester vary, since they are changed, as needed, to incorporate real-time issues.

The following detailed example of one workshop, designed to aid students in performing the product design portion of their brand analyses, presents students with an instructor-developed case regarding the interpretation of primary research from a historical perspective. The case is followed by discussion questions.

#### *Workshop: Case on Product Design & Interpretation of Primary Research*

Primary research can be critically important in the development of new products or the redesign of existing ones. This is especially true in the automotive industry where the cost of entry into a market or the retooling of an existing product is high, and mistakes are not fixed easily. Chrysler, Honda and Toyota all conducted primary research, when considering the design of their minivans.

Yates (1996) reports that Chrysler conducted a series of four focus groups across the United States when working on the redesign of its minivan product line in the early 1990's. Each focus group consisted of twenty to thirty current Chrysler minivan owners who were questioned on why they bought a minivan, what features they would like in future models, and what Chrysler should keep constant.

Yates also reports that a major finding of the focus groups indicated that function was much more important to these participants than owners of other types of vehicles. For example respondents liked the idea of a sliding left-side door. Other product features respondents valued included two wheelbases (long and short), improved seats, and contemporary styling. Chrysler also conducted eight additional focus groups to have current minivan owners rate the competition.

Chrysler wasn't the only manufacturer that went directly to the source to get input in designing products for the lucrative minivan market. Maynard (2003) discusses Honda's practice of "going to the spot" when redesigning the Odyssey to better compete in the minivan market. She notes that the first Odyssey was basically the same minivan Honda had developed for the Japanese market. It had no sliding door, was narrow to accommodate Japan's road layout, and had only a four-cylinder engine. It did have one feature consumers would come to value--a third row of seats that provide extra capacity.

Maynard reports that one of Honda's most influential product development executives, Kunimichi Odagaki, spent six months traveling across the U.S. to view personally how drivers in cities and suburbs used their minivans. Honda executives saw that, unlike in Japan, many American home owners perform their own home improvement projects and use their minivans to transport supplies.

As Maynard explains, Odagaki even went to the home of one focus group participant who said that he wanted to purchase a minivan while his wife did not. Odagaki found that the wife associated the Odyssey's round shape with a Mommy-mobile. The woman had a career, and didn't want to be viewed as a housewife. This input led Odagaki to insist that the Odyssey incorporate angular features and squared-off corners to give it a stronger shape.

Liker (2004) describes how Toyota also went to the source when working on a major redesign of its minivan. The chief engineer for the project, Yuji Yokoya, decided to learn about the North American market firsthand by driving across the U.S., as well as Canada and Mexico. Liker reports that Toyota's global philosophy had been to minimize vehicle weight, by designing the exterior to be as small as possible. However, after a Toyota executive watched customers load supplies for home improvement projects into their trucks and minivans, Toyota decided to enlarge their vehicle.

#### Discussion Questions

1. Why was it especially important for Honda and Toyota to experience the market in the development of their minivan?
2. Were their needs any different than those of Chrysler?
3. What primary sources could you use to develop your project?

This workshop demonstrates the importance of utilizing primary sources. The approaches used by Chrysler, Honda and Toyota allow manufacturers to discuss products with customers and get feedback to actual products. Observing and experiencing customers as they use their products, as well as immersing themselves in full-scale use can yield invaluable information. Students are introduced to the complexity of product development, as is illustrated through the history of product development for minivans. The workshop also guides students in data acquisition for their own brand analyses, by illustrating how they might use owner interviews, observation in use, and competitive comparisons.

## Implementation

The virtual live case approach works best for a moderate class size of 20-40 students which can accommodate the need to dedicate .5-1 hours per week to in-class workshops and coaching. Also, extra office hours beyond the regular schedule are needed to coach individual students and teams. On average, the instructor spends 1-2 extra office hours per week assisting students with their projects.

Grading the composite projects which are handed-in at the end of the semester causes a grading crunch at a time when instructors already face substantial time pressures. The projects are very detailed and there is a large amount of information to process to be able to provide students with detailed feedback.

The most unique time commitment for an instructor using the virtual live case approach is keeping current on the assigned industry to enable integration of real-time issues in the classroom. This requires *daily* review of trade publications, internet sites, business

papers and relevant magazines. Continual immersion in the chosen industry is necessary for all aspects of the project, ranging from careful consideration of brand assignments to student teams to anticipating significant potential changes and challenges in the industry.

There are several trade-offs in using the virtual live case approach. Unlike a live case situation in which students are in-house, students using the virtual live case must rely on secondary data and interviews. This trade-off can be acceptable, however, since the alternative would require students to work simultaneously with several automotive dealerships across various brands. The logistical challenges in terms of time requirements and interfacing with various businesses and personnel would be daunting.

## **Assessment**

As part of its goal of helping to ensure teaching excellence, AACSB has required assessment of student learning. Toward this goal, the instructor used multiple measures to conduct a general assessment of the virtual live case approach and gauge whether it enhanced student learning relative to the traditional case study approach. The primary measure involved surveying students after they completed their composite projects at the end of the semester. Other measures included informal discussions with students, as well as support staff at the library.

For the survey, students were asked to provide open-ended commentary on how the virtual live case approach compared to the more traditional case study approach. The five major themes that emerged relate to the link to professional responsibilities, real-time learning, active learning, engagement with the instructor, and engagement beyond the course. Details are shown in Table 2.

Students reported that the virtual live case approach created a workplace setting not found in traditional case study courses. Each team took ownership of a brand for the semester and became responsible for creating a complete brand strategy analysis and recommendations just as a brand manager would do. Students had to integrate with other colleagues (team members) and had responsibilities to fulfill to other colleagues working on complementary sections of the composite project.

**Table 2. Student Feedback on the Virtual Live Case Approach**

<i>Category:</i>	<i>Enhanced Learning Details:</i>
Links to Professional Responsibilities: Workplace Setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Brand Ownership</li> <li>• Responsibility to Colleagues</li> <li>• Integrating with Colleagues</li> </ul>
Engagement through Real-Time Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased Level of Involvement and Realism Required to Follow an Actual Brand</li> <li>• Dealing with Data as it Develops</li> <li>• Broader Definition of Research</li> <li>• Level of Creativity Required</li> </ul>
Active Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dealer Visits</li> <li>• Product Photographs</li> <li>• Customer Interviews</li> <li>• Class Presentations</li> <li>• Auto Show Visits</li> </ul>
Student/Instructor Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Workshops/Class Discussions</li> <li>• Coaching the Teams</li> <li>• Office Hours</li> <li>• Informal Discussions before Class</li> </ul>
Engagement Beyond the Course: Integration with Overall Business Curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Moving beyond Routine Application of Business Concepts across the Curriculum to Solve Current Problem:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Financial Support for Brand</li> <li>- Stakeholder Analysis</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Moving beyond Theoretical Models</li> </ul>

Students previously had worked on projects requiring that each member be responsible for a discrete section. The new experience was the level of integration with colleagues necessitated by a business environment that changes when dealing with real-time issues. Students had to communicate more extensively to determine how real-time issues impacted their brand and how to incorporate these changes into their project. They felt their work was facilitated, by having colleagues simultaneously working on the same brand. They also commented that class discussion of different brands assigned to other teams was useful in enhancing their understanding of the overall industry.

Students reported that the real-time dimension of the project added a great deal of realism to their learning. The virtual live case approach introduced students to the challenge of following an actual brand in real-time and having to deal with new data, as it developed over the course of the semester. Students indicated that learning was both enhanced and complicated by having to synthesize a wide range of emerging data such as auto sales, consumer confidence, dealer issues, external factors in the economy and new product launches.

Students commented that the virtual live case approach required them to become more engaged in the course, as they had to develop a broader definition of research. In analyzing their brand in real-time, they learned that all necessary data was not easily available on the internet or gathered from published data. They learned to exercise creativity, by calling and visiting automotive dealers and conducting customer interviews. Some students even took the initiative to go above and beyond course requirements to travel to a national automotive show to collect data.

Another reported enhancement to learning involved the way in which the virtual live case approach required students to apply information learned in other business courses. Students commented that they were accustomed to the routine application of business concepts learned in various courses such as looking at trends and analyzing past data. Students felt that completing the brand strategy analysis deepened their understanding of business concepts and the complexity of how they are intertwined. Students indicated that the project required them to expand their understanding of business concepts to be able to simultaneously collect their own data, identify trends, deal with real-time issues and consider how they might interrelate to impact future sales.

For example, when considering support for their assigned brand, students had to look at financial results at the company level as an indication of the company's ability to sustain campaigns for the assigned brand. They could not assume that future sales for their brand would be robust, based solely on strong current sales figures. Also, students learned to link stakeholder analysis to other issues such as marketing plans, employment, and political issues, rather than considering it in isolation.

The survey also asked students to identify the major challenges they encountered with the virtual live case approach. The greatest challenge for students related to the level of detail involved in the project. Students felt overwhelmed and frustrated, when trying to integrate all the pieces of information into a final semester report. Some students found it difficult to move beyond the theoretical models provided in the text where all information could be classified easily. They found the uncertainty and complexity of the real-world, real-time issues to be particularly challenging. Students also felt that while the project was worthwhile, it required a much greater time commitment than traditional case study projects.

The workshops were designed to facilitate students' ability to complete their brand strategy analysis projects. Many students found them helpful, but felt there was a need for more guidance in the form of additional workshops. Conducting additional workshops, such as the ones focusing on customer/product and price integration or dealer/customer support programs, would help to alleviate student frustrations in dealing with the myriad of details. The workshops would serve to reinforce marketing concepts, while helping students to see how to integrate them to form a complete brand strategy analysis.

A possible enhancement to the workshop approach would be to have students make presentations on their brand during the semester. One possibility would be to simulate an industry conference at mid-term. The conference would allow students to teach each other about the industry. It also would help them to identify areas where they need to do additional work.

An informal measure of the virtual live case approach emerged from discussions with students in which reactions have been positive overall. Several students have used their projects during job interviews to demonstrate their marketing knowledge and analysis skills. They reported that prospective employers were impressed with the work involved in the project and how the students moved well beyond theory to apply marketing concepts to current marketing issues.

A final informal measure of student learning has come from the University's Business Reference Librarian who organizes library training sessions for students. The librarian uses examples from the course to illustrate the importance of knowing how to locate and utilize resources beyond text books, the web and the popular press. The librarian conveyed that these sessions are helpful, not just for those enrolled in the course, but for all students in the business school.

## **Further Research**

The development of student-brand managers in real-time through use of virtual live cases could be accomplished with other product/service applications and in non-capstone marketing classes. This technique is especially well-suited to high-involvement purchases involving complicated decisions with many details. Some potential product/service applications include bicycles, cameras, computers and repair services. The technique could be extended to low-involvement goods with an extensive focus on channels of distribution, as well as the final consumer. These applications lend themselves to the virtual live case approach because students can relate to the products/services, and historical data is readily available.

Non-capstone marketing classes could use this technique for developing projects in areas such as marketing communications, pricing, and new product development. It also would be possible to use this approach to integrate courses. For example, a product development course could focus on analysis of a new product, while a services marketing course could develop parts and repair programs.

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