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## Turning Guest Speakers' Visits into Active Learning Opportunities

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# Turning Guest Speakers' Visits into Active Learning Opportunities

## **Cover Page Footnote**

The idea described in this paper was presented at the Association of Collegiate Marketing Educators Conference in 2015 and was the AxxessCapon Teaching Innovation Competition Winner.

# Turning Guest Speakers' Visits into Active Learning Opportunities

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**Abstract** - While guest speakers have a lot to offer, the traditional format of their visits to marketing classes may hinder student engagement. This paper describes an idea used in marketing classes intended to increase active learning and to maximize impact of guest speakers' visits. It involves creating assignments for the students to prepare prior to a speaker's visit. As a result, the students end up preparing thoughtful questions, they are engaged in their discussion with the speaker, and they make a more conscious effort to link course material to the insight from the speaker.

**Keywords** - Education, Pedagogy, Guest speakers, Active learning

**Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and/or Practitioners** - This paper provides a framework to help marketing educators engage more meaningfully their students with guest speakers visiting their classes.

## Introduction

Guest speakers from the industry can provide business students with valuable practical knowledge and real-world examples. Their insight facilitates the integration of theory and practice within course content (Athavale, Davis, & Myring, 2008; Bridges, 1999). Consequently, visits by guest speakers to marketing courses have the potential of enhancing the students' experience and contributing meaningfully to students' learning; therefore, such visits are usually highly recommended (Bridges, 1999; Taylor, 2003).

However, although students often find the visits by the guest speakers enjoyable, they do not necessarily find them challenging (Karns, 2005). Therefore, in terms of impact on student learning, the traditional format of guest speakers' visit may not be effective. In fact, Morrison, Sweeney, and Heffernan (2003) found that especially students with visual and sequential

learning styles disliked guest speakers; the authors attributed the finding to the fact that “the contribution of guest speakers to learning may also be unclear to these students who place a greater emphasis on learning in steps rather than on getting an insight into a topic that may be somewhat of a tangent” (p. 214.) Similarly, Taylor et al. (2004) found students to have low desire for guest speakers, which the authors attributed to the students “failing to grasp the significance of the guest speakers’ comments to the course” (p. 47). Consequently, they called for faculty to be more intentional in efforts to integrate the guest speakers’ insight into the overall course experience.

I faced similar challenges when having guest speakers in my courses, which prompted me to search for a more effective format. The traditionally used format of a guest speaker visit entails a talk by the speaker and afterwards, if there is time left, some time for questions by the students. This format presents several problems that may explain why the visits are often less impactful than we hope.

First, in order for the traditional format to work, speakers may need to spend substantial time to prepare a presentation. This kind of a time commitment may deter busy professionals from being willing to prepare properly for their visit. In my experience lack of preparation was often evident in one of two ways: a) a long series of slides that were clearly prepared in the past for another occasion and were not subsequently tailored for the student audience in any way or b) the speaker “winking” it by sharing random stories from his or her experience and having no clear focus or substantive content. In both cases, the result was a rather underwhelming experience for the students.

Another challenge pertains to the fact that students often may perceive the visits by guest speakers as “down time.” It is often hard for the professor to include the speaker’s material in exams. Therefore, students may have little interest in a speaker (especially when the speaker’s job or place of employment is not exciting to the students) and pay little attention to what he or she has to share because they feel there is not much at stake.

Although occasionally some students ask great questions, often the Q&A section is fairly basic. This means general questions along the lines of career advice or basic questions about the speaker’s organization. In summary, the key issues with the typical student questions I used to have when guest speakers would come were that the questions:

- 1) Were fairly basic.
- 2) Focused mostly on simply information.
- 3) Could easily have been answered by looking at the company’s website.

Overall, there seemed to be little effort to actively process the material the speaker covers and/or to link course materials to the examples used by the

speaker. Moreover, having a long talk by the speaker before getting to questions often may result in an uninterested audience because of the earlier lack of interaction. Therefore, several times, students may not benefit from the speaker or see the connection between the speaker's talk and course content (Taylor et al., 2004).

All of these issues are problematic as they illustrate limited engagement with the course material and, consequently, make it difficult to meet my course objectives. Primarily, my main purpose for bringing guest speakers to my class is for helping me accomplish specific learning objectives and expected student outcomes; students should be able to link real-world issues to class concepts, students should be able to analyze real problems and offer recommendations, and students should be able to think critically.

As a way to address these issues I have created a more interactive environment where students have to prepare for each speaker's visit prior to the visit.

## **Procedures**

I have used this idea in courses like Marketing Communications, Sports Marketing, and Experiential Marketing but it can apply to any marketing course where the professor brings guest speakers. It has worked equally well in all the courses where I have used it.

In order to turn the guest speakers' visits to an active learning opportunity that helps accomplish the learning outcomes, I assign required graded assignments on the guest speakers. Specific steps include the following:

- 1) While scheduling the visit, I ask the speakers to submit brief information regarding their specific areas and duties, including any relevant websites the students should visit to get insight.
- 2) Students need to do their "homework" regarding the speaker's organization and industry.
- 3) Students then prepare questions that are due two-three days before the speaker's visit. The questions should be based on information learned from the "homework" and should include a rationale that links it to course material.
- 4) I usually have the students submit three questions for each speaker and grade each question separately, dropping the lowest of the three scores. Questions are graded based on a) depth of background knowledge on company/industry, b) successful connection to class concepts/material, and c) importance of question (quality of rationale for asking specific question).

- 5) All questions are submitted to the professor first. Once I receive them, I go through them and organizes them into one file (eliminating questions that are similar), which I then forward to the speaker before the visit. This way the speaker is familiar with the key topics that will be covered before coming to class.
- 6) During the actual visit, after a brief introduction by the professor and a short introductory opening by the speaker (5-10 minutes), the students begin asking their questions, including their rationale for asking the question, leading to an energetic and interactive experience for both the students and the speakers.

As a way to help students understand how to move their thinking from basic questions to more thoughtful questions, I give them the following basic guide to help them prepare good questions that would lead to a meaningful discussion with the speaker. It provides examples of how essentially the same type of question can be asked in a variety of ways, getting gradually better and how each version corresponds to earning a higher grade.

Do you have a specific target market? → F

Who is your target market? → D

I see from your website that you have picked [group x] as your target market; why? → C

I see from your website that you have picked [group x] as your target market, which makes me think you used [segmentation variables y and z] as the most important factors in your selection; why? → B

I have read in your website that you use [marketing tactics a and b]. Therefore, it seems to me that you specifically try to cater to [group x]. In class we have discussed [risks y and z] when focusing on [group x]. What was your reasoning for targeting [group x] and how do you deal with [risks y and z]? → A

## Results

Following are a couple of examples of actual questions submitted by my students for visits by guest speakers after the assignment was implemented.

“We have learned in class that it is important for a company’s touchpoints to reinforce the same message throughout each of the touchpoints because it is important to be able to form an identity and give the consumer a clear expectation of what sort of product they will be getting. The Sea World

touchpoints seem to communicate across a unique experience that families are able to connect the excitement of being able to see rare animals with fun of other activities. With that being said, how is Sea World able to differentiate from the zoos and other theme parks in the Southern California area that try to offer a similar experience?” (Question asked to a speaker from marketing at SeaWorld.)

“We have learned that for entertainment experiences many times there is a formula of having a likeable and unlikeable protagonist, having a struggle between the two, and having the likeable protagonist win. This is especially important for younger children to have the likeable hero win. Sony Online Entertainment has begun to move into the children’s realm with the Free Realms and Clone Wars. In Clone Wars the player gets to be a Jedi and fight the evil forces and will become the hero. What are some other things that you do to make the online world more enjoyable for children and make them lifelong customers? (Question asked to a speaker from marketing at Sony Online Entertainment)

In general, despite some initial concerns by some students (given the novelty of the assignment), student feedback in all classes indicated a positive response to the experience. The positive feedback was both in terms of enjoyment of the experience of having the speaker visit and also (and more importantly) in terms of learning the course material better by actively linking it to real-world applications from the speakers. One student commented in the course evaluation that “the assignment for questions for the speakers was *intense!* But we got the hang of them...”

Following are some examples of student quotes from course evaluations where this assignment was used.

### **Evidence regarding success on reinforcing course material**

“The guest speakers were very helpful because I understood the class material better.”

“The guest speakers were all great. The homework helped relate the class concepts to real life examples.”

“The speakers that came to class went hand in hand with what we were learning.”

“Guest speakers who were doing what we were learning really added to the lessons and helped my learning experience.”

### **Evidence regarding success on increasing student engagement**

“Guest speakers’ assignments forced us to engage. Homework was interesting too.”

“The guest speakers were effective and got me more interested in the class.”

“I really liked the guest speaker assignment because it gets you to think critically.”

Feedback from the speakers was also very positive. Following are some excerpts from emails provided by the speakers regarding this approach:

“I thought that the class really prepared for the talk and I was impressed by what they learned about the company. I honestly would not change a thing.”

“It was truly a fun experience for me and much more personal than the traditional lectures I am asked to give. I would not change a thing! I liked that they knew things about my business before coming in. It keeps you honest and allows for more two way dialogue. As a student, the interaction would seemingly keep me interested, as the speaker it would keep things real.”

Speakers also shared how they liked the idea that they did not have to prepare a formal presentation, they liked getting a copy of the students’ questions in advance so they knew what to expect without any surprises that could make them uncomfortable, and, probably most important of all, they all felt the time was spent in a very productive and meaningful way. They thought positively of the interactive nature of the talk and the students’ active participation, both in terms of keeping the energy high but also in terms of interesting and meaningful points the students make as a result of their preparation. All the speakers that came to my class that also visited and talked to other universities made a point of commenting on how much more they liked this version rather than the standard format typically used and how more impressed they were by my students.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this assignment improves a commonly used existing practice, is simple and easy to use, can be adapted for **any** marketing class where guest speakers would visit, and impacts student learning and student engagement.

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Dr. Dalakas earned his Ph.D. in Marketing from the University of Oregon and is a Professor of Marketing at California State University San Marcos. He has published in numerous journals including *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, *Journal of Services Marketing*, *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, and *Journal of Marketing Communications*. He has been recognized for teaching innovation by the Academy of Marketing Science, the Association of Collegiate Marketing Educators, and the Marketing Management Association.

