

INTEGRATING SERVICE LEARNING INTO AN ADVERTISING/PROMOTIONS CLASSROOM

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INTRODUCTION

How does one give students a realistic view of the advertising/promotions industry, provide hands-on experience that also enhances the resume, and fulfills the public affairs mission of a university at the same time? At Missouri State University, introductory advertising/promotions students engage in a Citizenship and Service Learning Project where they serve as an agency and produce marketing research and creative for a nonprofit client.

This began several years ago as the instructor wanted to maintain more "control" over projects and integrity of research. Rather than allow teams to pick a client, a single nonprofit client is selected by the professor to serve as the recipient of the class research/work. Each student team is given the same assignment, introductory information, primary research data, and then ultimately must take that, along with other research they gather, to create their marketing solution in the form of an integrated marketing communications plan. At the end of the semester, each team "pitches" their proposal to the client. Students not only get feedback from the non profit agency, but also from the other students and instructor who are also well versed in the case.

METHODOLOGY

At the beginning of the semester, students are introduced to one another and asked to form advertising "agencies"—usually four to five individuals per team—based on the skill set they believe they need within the team. Their first assignment is a corporate identity piece—name/logo. This not only initiates them into the creative process but helps them begin to form a group identity. It is usually a shock as their initial pieces are returned to be re-thought, re-done, etc. Most have never had to, at this point; redo assignments until they actually got it right as opposed to simply getting a grade on it. It begins to dawn on them that this could be a different kind of class with different kinds of demands!

Team dynamics are discussed and the class then goes over the assignment they will be working on throughout the semester—the integrated communication plansbook and presentation they will make to the nonprofit client. Furthermore, the client visits class at about the three week mark (semester block) to discuss their expectations, elaborate on the marketing problems/issues as they see them, answer questions, etc. This visit really jumpstarts the teams as they realize they have a "real" client expecting real answers!

Students should have already begun to immerse themselves into the client's world, product, marketing problem, competition, etc. through secondary research by this time. After the client visit, however, the primary research begins. To make it more meaningful to the client and to protect the integrity of the research, this is done cooperatively with the instructor and all teams working

together. Therefore, when the piece is completed, all teams are given the same primary research findings—their job, is, however, to analyze and use as they see fit. In many cases this will include a major phone or online survey. In some cases where that aren't perceived to be the best type of research for the project at hand, focus groups are used instead.

It's important to note, that the service learning project is going on—mostly outside the regular classroom as traditional coursework is also covered. However, in most cases, new concepts learned are all tied back to the service learning case. During the first half of the semester students can work on the research and situation analysis aspect of their project. By about mid-term, they are ready to begin work on creative (after one more smaller preparatory creative assignment) and media aspects, as those things are covered in class. Finally promotion and public relations aspects are added as that material is covered closer to the end of the semester.

Students, outside of class, often visit the client's facility and may schedule time for more in-depth meetings with the client (providing a reasonable time to work with students in a stipulation for client's being accepted), and of course meet regularly with their team members as they work on the project. The professor also works with individual teams/team members as questions, issues come up throughout the semester.

During the last two weeks of the semester, tensions mount, as students must turn their plansbooks in before presentations begin the following week. A copy of the plansbook is reviewed by the instructor and client prior to presentations. (Even team presentation order is competitive—teams, in a review for a test, play "Who Wants to be a Media Millionaire," with the teams amassing the most points getting first pick on presentation order.

At the end of the timed presentation team members go through a question and answer period with the instructor, client, and other classmates.

OUTCOMES

This assignment, while very rigorous (most students spend 15-35 hours outside the regular classroom on this project alone), accomplishes many things. For the client, it gives them much needed marketing insights, creative ideas and a fresh perspective as new eyes have examined their issues. (In many cases the professor follows up to further assist the nonprofit agency sort through the myriad of ideas presented.) The plansbooks they have received are theirs to keep and they may use ideas suggested.

For the student, they get a resume builder, they have actually worked with a client so it can be listed as such or can be listed as a philanthropic activity as well. They experience the competitive nature of the industry and the joys and frustrations of working extensively with teammates. The level of performance goes up as they are directly accountable to their teammates and because they know they will be presenting to a real client and in front of their classmates. They also have a service learning designation on their transcript for this class and in some cases are honored for their work by the University.

For the professor, this is a much more manageable than having multiple teams choosing multiple clients. Furthermore, in many cases, primary research developed for the case, become the starting point for further academic research/study. It also serves as a way to provide service in the

name of the university within the community. Ultimately after working intimately with so many major nonprofits in the area, other teaching ideas/examples arise.

This assignment has been developed and refined over many, many years. There is usually a two to three semester waiting list to be considered as a client. Final client selection is made solely by the instructor. Some of the more recognizable clients include Girl Scouts, Big Brothers Big Sisters, Junior League, Consumer Credit Counseling Service, Children's Miracle Network to name a few. Certainly smaller, more local organizations are accepted as well. Organizations have ranged from arts groups to sports groups to educational institutions, to a city, to children's advocacy groups.

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