

IMPROVING UNDERGRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY, THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE AND STUDENT SATISFACTION THROUGH PRACTITIONER MODULE PARTNERSHIP AND THE SPONSORSHIP OF UNDERGRADUATE MODULES

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Context and opportunity

Advanced Marketing Communications, a final year undergraduate module, integrates several foundations of the marketing discipline i.e. consumer behaviour, marketing communications and marketing strategy. The module presents students with an opportunity to understand how marketing problems faced by an organisation can be addressed through the effective use of advanced marketing communications techniques. In other words how the effective development of marketing campaigns can address practical marketing issues of repositioning poorly positioned brands to improve market share, extend brands into new market segments and launch new products to combat competitive threats.

The module is delivered in the final term of the degree, the very time when students wishing to enter a career within the world of advertising agencies or in marketing operations of major organisations, will be facing rounds of job applications, interviews, assessment centres and so on for marketing graduate schemes, internships and full-time marketing positions. In addition to the requirements of organisations for candidates to have the ability to frame and understand marketing problems and develop effective solutions on paper, (mostly addressed by the theory and research elements of the module), employers will also be looking for evidence that candidates have a practical understanding and experience of:

- Persuasively pitching and presenting solutions to marketing problems to senior stakeholders and key decision makers
- Taking a solution from paper and delivering a cost effective and innovative campaign
- Campaign development from both a client and agency perspective
- Evaluating new and emerging marketing communications tools
- How client organisations and advertising agencies manage what can be a very tricky relationship.

As the module leader, the challenge was to develop the module to address these pressing and practical requirements. In doing so it was necessary to develop opportunities to operationalize theory and research to demonstrate its relevance and applicableness to developing solutions to practical marketing problems. The principal aim being to increase the potential employability of marketing students and in turn their satisfaction with the module.

The solution – module sponsorship by a major London advertising agency

In 2010/11 Billington Cartmell (BC), a major London advertising agency, with clients such as LloydsTSB, Nestle and GlaxoSmithkline agreed to sponsor the Advanced Marketing Communications module and in doing so agreed to provide the following to develop students' practical skills and experience:

- **Joint review and amendment of module content from a practitioner perspective** The module was reviewed and amended, from a practitioner perspective, to integrate and incorporate the activity set out below.
- **Practical assessment - provide a “Live” and current client problem, being worked on by the agency, for students to develop a commercially compelling marketing communications campaign** BC and their client GlaxoSmithKline provided a live marketing problem, which the agency were working on at the time for the students in groups to develop a campaign solution over the 12 week module period. The challenge was to reposition a well-known fast moving consumer goods brand, “Horlicks”, from a night time drink taken prior to sleep to a relaxing and early evening drink”.
- **Briefing of students by the agency/client and on-going contact through the campaign development process** Students were briefed directly by the agency and their client on the marketing problem, with discussion and development of the importance of client briefing, how to manage this vital activity, accompanied by follow-up sessions to take questions on the brief and for the brief to be challenged. This included providing students with packs of the product to taste and to get a practical feel to the product’s packaging and merchandising.
- **Provide Guest Lectures on related practical skills, “the art of pitching” etc** BC provided practitioner guest speakers to deliver presentations on and discuss the practical challenges of pitching, campaign development, creativity in advertising etc, which were delivered as a component part of lectures in support of relevant theory and research.
- **Provide the main participants of a pitching panel, where each group pitched their solution to the agency/client and a number of industry experts** Each of the 28 groups, over a two day period, pitched their campaign solution to key members of the agency/client, the Regional Director of the Chartered Institute of Marketing and an external pitching consultant. This was not a false, staged environment, rather an opportunity to sell a campaign solution to industry experts with the opportunity for students to gain a paid summer internship at the agency and also for groups to receive a best pitch first, second or third prize. The results of the pitches were considered for incorporation into the agency’s on-going development of solutions for their client.
- **Award a number of paid internships for students based upon their performance in the campaign pitches** Based upon students’ performance in the pitching assessment, a number of students were invited for interview by Billington Cartmell, with several paid summer internships awarded to students. As a result a number of offers of full-time employment were made.
- **Award prizes for pitch performance** Based upon students’ performance in the pitching assessment, the top three pitches were awarded prizes by BC, which were formally recognised and certified by Aston Business School.

Additional support to compliment the sponsorship activity.

With 28 groups developing campaigns, and their associated pitches, over the course of the 12 week module it was essential that each group had the opportunity to discuss their campaign with the lecturer a number of times throughout its development. So each week, three one hour tutorials were scheduled for individual groups to meet with the lecturer on a biweekly basis, resulting in the opportunity for each group to meet five times with the lecturer over the course of the module.

In addition to the guest lectures provided by Billington Cartmell, it was necessary to include guest lectures on specific specialist subjects, delivered by external experts. Guest lectures on brand equity measurement, the internal impact of branding, campaign evaluation and media planning were delivered by practitioners from widely recognised marketing organisations based in the West Midlands including McCann Erickson, Millward Brown, and Cogent Elliot.

The Chartered Institute of Marketing, given its role to develop future marketers in the West Midlands, aided the development of the module in assisting in the development of the pitch assessment criteria and, in the form of their Regional Director, marking and providing feedback on the student pitches.

Learning and teaching benefits

The learning and teaching benefits of the 2010/11 module, when compared to the previous year, were markedly improved in terms of an increase in overall student performance, student evaluation of the module and the opportunities provided to integrate theory and research with marketing practice:

- **Improved student evaluation** The overall student satisfaction of the module, against the previous year, improved from 3.0 to 4.0 scoring 4.3 for “module is valuable”, 4.2 for “module is challenging”, 4.5 for “links to practical examples”, 4.3 for “student participation” and respectively 4.3 / 4.5 for “good teaching style” and “knowledge of subject”.
- **Improved coursework and exam performance** In overall terms the mean mark moved up to 60.53% (sd 8.96) from 51.12% (sd 8.84) the previous year. Exam performance increased by 12% and coursework assessment moved from a mean of 56.74% to 61.75%. Other factors may have influenced this improvement, however, strong narrative student feedback emphasises the value of the practical nature of the module in applying theory and research to practice.
- **Central theme to integrate research and theory with practice** The “live” marketing problem, the repositioning of Horlicks, provided a central theme for lectures, where each week research and theoretical content were discussed and applied in this context. One central theme provided both continuity and the opportunity to integrate practically frameworks and models.
- **Likely increased ability for students to integrate and apply research and theory in an exam setting** Compared to the previous year students demonstrated a greater ability to apply research and theory in an examination setting. The year-on-year increase in exam performance of 12% can be directly attributed to students arriving at definite and relevant conclusions based upon using their experience of the Horlicks assessment to consider the relevance of theory and research, which was a key learning outcome for the module.
- **Opportunity for the lecturer to integrate and build relationships with a large student group.** Sometimes it can be difficult for lecturers to build relationships with a large student group, in this case 190 students. Meeting each assessment student group five times during the module, and having a common point of reference for class discussion, built a stronger two-way relationship between the class and the lecturer.

Learning and teaching challenges

Although this model of delivery achieved several important and relevant teaching and learning benefits, a number of challenges accompanied this form of module delivery. Specifically, the increase in time and resource needed over and above taking a more conventional model of delivery:

- **Change module sequence and content to cope with new lecture format** In order to integrate guest lectures into lecture time, change the emphasis of the module in response to practitioner feedback and incorporate the Horlicks live marketing problem, the content and structure of the existing lectures required changing and re-sequencing.
- **Greater tutorial time and out of lecture support** For students to gain the maximum benefit from working on the “live” problem and for each student group to be practically assessed in the form of a campaign “pitch”, greater face-to-face time was needed in tutorials.
- **More administration** The sourcing of the partnerships, its on-going management, making arrangements for additional guest lectures etc requires greater administration from the lecturer.
- **Greater lecture preparation** Linking and integrating guest lecture content increased lecture preparation time.

Employability benefits for students

The intention of changing the delivery model was practically to support students in their search for their first role in marketing by providing the opportunity for students to develop specific work-based

marketing technical skills (pitching and pitch development) and experience client and advertising agency specific processes:

- **Internships, employment and incentives** As a result of Billington Cartmell seeing and jointly assessing the 28 student pitches, 15 students were invited for interview. A number of these were offered and accepted paid summer internships that resulted in some full-time job offers. The potential of the internships and the pitching prizes plus the added incentive of working on a “live” practical problem acted as an incentive for students to commit to the module and its assessment.
- **Developed practical work based skills** Students, in a “live” setting were equipped with first-hand experience and knowledge of the client/agency briefing process, translating a brief into a marketing problem that required a solution, end-to-end campaign development (including creative development) and crafting and delivering a pitch to experienced industry and agency practitioners.
- **Experience for use at interviews and selection** Students successfully used the “Horlicks” experience and their exposure to campaign development, along with their placement year, to enhance their case during recruitment and selection. This was especially during competence based interviews that required students to demonstrate how they had addressed practical work based challenges.
- **Network growth** Many students took the opportunity to extend their professional and social networks using electronic media to connect to practitioner guest speakers and their organisations.

Disadvantages

The numerous opportunities presented to students to improve their prospects of employment within the marketing profession brought with them a number of challenges:

- **Increased workload and effort required to optimise the opportunities in their final term** During their final term, where final year students are most under pressure, students had to commit to achieving tight and demanding deadlines in order to deliver innovative and practical coursework. This mirrored the challenges faced in the majority of practitioner marketing roles but required students to work in a professional and organised manner, and substantially commit to dedicate the requisite time and effort to deliver high quality output, if they were to benefit fully from the process.
- **More group work** Although more group work was required in the final term for final year undergraduates, the practical work-related nature of the work positively contributed to the favourable teaching evaluations.

Future application and development of the model based upon partner and student feedback

The application of the practitioner module partnership and sponsorship model is not limited to the marketing communications discipline. For 2011/12 the model was applied and extended in the form of a partnership with McCann Erickson, Birmingham with the joint design and delivery of a new final year undergraduate module in “Strategic Brand Management”. Working with their client, National Express, the business problem is to assess development potential and future direction for their corporate brand. The model has the potential to be applied outside of the marketing discipline to other disciplines within Aston Business School and in other Schools of the University. Broadly its transferability is dependent upon the presence of a number of factors:

- Partnering with an organisation that is willing to share commercial information and open up their organisation to the University in return for gaining access to a pool of undergraduates and receiving a diverse set of solutions to a business problem that is central to the organisation’s future success.

- Sourcing a business problem or organisational issue where a suitable solution can be developed at a distance i.e. without students having to work in the organisation for a significant period of time or become directly immersed in its day-to-day operation.
- That the business problem lends itself to a practical form of assessment that mirrors a real-life professional experience i.e. the presentation of an advertising solution to an advertising agency client in the form of an “agency pitch”.
- That the academic is willing to recognise and work within the practical commercial and operational constraints of the partner organisation. Making the necessary trade-offs to accommodate the need for students to develop a practical solution to the business problem and make themselves available for press and PR activity.
- That the partner and sponsoring organisation is willing to invest time and resource in briefing in the business problem, delivering guest lectures, supporting the students in development of their solutions and participating in the marking and evaluating the module assessment.

The success of the model can be gauged from the very positive feedback received from Billington Cartmell, the sponsoring organisation of the 2010/11 Advanced Marketing Communications Module:

“The partnership allowed us to generate a wide variety of practical options on how to develop the Horlicks brand into the future, which were both valuable to us and our client. Importantly the sponsorship meant we could recruit talent into the agency based upon seeing students pitch in a real-world setting and having experienced at first hand the quality of their practical commercial thinking ”.

Student feedback, from the module evaluation sheets, was also very positive. Examples of which were:

“This module has a lot of real life value”.

“I am about to work for an advertising agency, the course really prepared me for this”.

“Real life application of the coursework was great and made the experience a lot more exciting”.

“Guest lecturers give great insight into industry practice and applying theory to real working companies”.

“Thoroughly enjoyed the coursework and guest lectures from industry – would like to see this adopted across all lectures”.

“Use of journal articles and results of research was interesting, better than only learning theory without relation to practice”.

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Example used with Undergraduate Students on BM3382: Advanced Marketing Communication