

It Takes Two: Developing a Successful Partnership between Clients and Students in Client-Based Projects

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Both faculty and employers are motivated to advance learning beyond the classroom in order to teach skills required by graduates to succeed in business careers. The authors use a client-based project to build a bridge between marketing theory and practice, allowing students to develop their skills within a course while working with a real company. The authors demonstrate how a client-based project can succeed in the classroom with motivating incentives, positive client engagement, and earning real-world experience—all of which positively enhanced students' participation, project deliverables, and enjoyment in the class project.

INTRODUCTION

The modern marketing classroom has an increasing demand for expanding theory into practice and introducing students to real-world experiences while they are still in the collegiate environment. One effective way marketing faculty can help students gain such hands-on experience is by integrating a client-based project into their course. Client-based projects can be as small as helping a company choose a logo (which, students will quickly learn, is not actually a “small” feat!) or a one-week activity where the class works together to tackle a modern business problem. But, for more adventurous faculty who are willing to get out of their textbook-accompanied comfort zone, client-based projects can be as vast as their imagination allows.

No matter the course or the topic, there is a way to integrate a client-based project into any course in the marketing curriculum so that the targeted lessons are covered and curricular objectives are achieved. Faculty flexibility is essential, but the benefits experienced by the students far exceed the resources expended. Additionally, it is important to make this beneficial to the client. This paper serves to provide guidance and tips to faculty who may be interested in incorporating a client-based project into their course.

THE CLIENT-BASED PROJECT

The motivation and ideas for this paper stem from a semester-long project in a Marketing Communications class. In that project, 40 students (10 teams of four students) created a rebranding strategy and corresponding IMC plan for a business. Although the project turned out to be a larger

undertaking than anyone anticipated, students, the client, and faculty members alike deemed this project very successful. Part of the success was due to the participation of the client, who made four visits to campus: once to introduce the project, twice mid-way through the semester to meet with student teams, and once at the end of the semester when a team from the company came to hear the presentations. The client team also reviewed teams' written projects.

Students were also highly motivated by the access given to them to visit the company's headquarters for a more in-depth look at the business and to meet with employees. Each team submitted a written document for their plan and also prepared a short presentation. On the evening of final team presentations, the marketing department hosted a reception to honor the students' hard work and unveil who the client picked as the best team. Each member of the winning team received a \$1,000 scholarship from the client. The project was 50% of the grade in this class; client feedback was considered, but how the client ranked the teams did not directly impact students' grades. This project was a large undertaking for a 3-credit hour class, and this paper provides lessons learned and ideas that others may want to implement.

BENEFITS OF THE CLIENT-BASED PROJECT

Client-based projects provide an opportunity for students to solve real-world business problems that an organization is facing. The benefits of client-based projects include teaching problem solving, teamwork, and communication skills (Parsons and Lepkowska-White, 2009), as well as developing critical thinking and professionalism through experiential learning (Alvarez, Taylor, & Rauseo, 2015). These projects also provide an excellent chance for students to practice their professional writing, which is a core skill that employers seek in new graduates (Wickliff, 1997; Andrews, 2015).

While many course projects focus on a hot topic being covered in the mainstream media or working with a fictitious company to solve a fabricated problem, students in client-based projects get to do work that *matters*. Research supports that modern students are graduating and seeking careers where they feel they can make a difference (Scroggins, 2008). The client-based project accomplishes this at the collegiate level by allowing students to interact with real business situations, while also increasing students' interest and bringing course content to life. Additionally, client-based projects allow students to feel that they have made a difference, because they are solving a problem for their client.

In this holistically designed pedagogy—which we find to be very motivating to students—rigor, relevance, and learning outcomes can be maximized. Course deliverables and AACSB objectives can still be freely evaluated. In fact, Baker and Stewart (2012) provide an AACSB Assurance of Learning Rubric designed for competitive simulations that can be adapted to client-based projects that have multiple check-in points with deliverables to assess progress. In some universities, client-based projects can even earn a course a “service-based learning” designation because of the benefit that students provide to the client organization.

Get the Client Involved!

When starting a client search, professors should be enthusiastic about considering how businesses in their local community can benefit in some way from student input. It may be a local non-profit needing assistance in a social media campaign, an organization needing help designing a new logo, or a business that wants to expand beyond consumer sales and wants help with creating a corporate sales program. The size of the project determines the time needed to complete it, and faculty should be mindful to allow students enough time to create a high-quality finished product without dragging the project out so students get tired of it. If clients are willing to make a long-term commitment and it fits with the scope of the course, client projects can even be continued in phases where, for example, a spring semester class builds on the accomplishments of a course project during fall semester.

Flexibility is essential when working with a client, but there are several constraints that should be established before the project begins. First, a document laying out the aims, goals, and expectations of the project should be prepared collaboratively by the client and instructor. Details for assessment should be provided (rubrics encouraged), timelines for check-in meetings should be set, and deadlines for drafts,

and finished projects should be available from the start. Regular, short meetings with the instructor (typically during office hours) will keep students on-task and help teams function more cohesively. Careful alignment of course content, lectures, and activities with the progress of the project will maximize time in the classroom. Additionally, there should be a consensus of how the ideas and outcomes of the project may be used. Depending on the project and client, confidentiality agreements, proprietary agreements, or contracts may need to be used. Strong communication of these details up front is recommended.

When considering the level of involvement with the client, it is helpful if the client is willing to interact with the students face-to-face (or via Skype) several times during the semester. At a minimum, clients should meet with the students at the beginning of the project to establish a connection and stimulate interest as well as at the end of the project, when students will present their findings and suggestions. Additionally, some clients are willing to either share their contact information with students or to create an email account solely for the project, where students can email questions to the client. Professors can also create a ‘best practices’ document to assist the client in establishing and maintaining communication with students and faculty.

Involvement of the client with the class is a huge influencer of this relevancy in students’ minds. The authors’ experience finds that introducing the project in detail is a key component to student “buy-in”. If possible, the project should be introduced by the client and presented enthusiastically (in person is best, but Skype is a valid second option). When the students see that the client cares deeply about the issue at hand and truly values the students’ input, students will quickly create strong personal connections with the organization, its representatives, and the issues it is facing. This, in itself, greatly influences the effort and outcomes of the project. Additionally, using client-based projects regularly also allows instructors or clients to share of past teams’ achievements as a mechanism to drive continued success.

CHALLENGES OF CLIENT-BASED PROJECTS

While client-based projects provide powerful learning environments for applying course content and encouraging interactions between university students and the business community. However, all projects come with challenges. If the projects are designed to be team-based, instructors must handle typical team-oriented issues like determining how to assign the teams, building team comradery, whether teams are allowed to ‘fire’ a member, and so on. If the projects are individually completed, instructors may have an abnormally heavier grading load. Client-based projects, though, have several challenges that are unique to their design.

Selecting a Client

While the idea of a client-based project is not new, very few faculty members take advantage of this opportunity because of the additional work involved reorganizing lectures to align with project deliverables, but also because many faculty feel limited in finding a client. Whether the client is a public or private company, a non-profit, of a particular size, or in a certain industry are all at the discretion of the instructor. If faculty want to introduce a client-project but do not know of companies that fit, they should speak with internship coordinators or their university career center to get ideas of companies that particularly like their students and might want to partner together. Additionally, they can reach out to their personal network, their school’s alumni network, or their Chamber of Commerce. While the client does not have to be local, it’s advisable to work with a client within driving distance to encourage additional engagement if students will have opportunities to visit the client organization.

Campus Visits

The authors have found it beneficial for the client to also visit campus one (or more) day(s) mid-way through the project to meet with students. The client may present during class time and then, if students are completing the project in teams, teams can schedule meetings with the client to check-in and share their progress while also getting feedback on their proposed next steps. We recommend having students

be mindful of professionalism by creating written agendas for these meetings and managing their time with the client effectively. For example, if they have 30 minutes with the client, what are the key questions they want to ask or ideas they want to present? Having the team jointly prepare a written agenda helps them get organized for the meeting. While these student-client interactions do not need to involve the course instructor, instructors should be aware that these meetings generally are quite motivating or demotivating to students, depending on how they perceive the client's enthusiasm or dislike for their ideas; sometimes the instructor will need to give a pep talk and help teams refocus their energies.

Encouraging the client to visit campus also allows the bond between the university and client organization to strengthen. If time allows, instructors should offer to meet the client for coffee or lunch to have their own check-in meeting. This often results in conversations about next steps, which may lead to internships, full-time hires, or future client projects. Also, encouraging students to wear apparel supporting their school on the days of visits (unless business attire has been predetermined) provides a contagious sense of unity and school spirit.

MAINTAINING SCOPE

For clients, meeting with the students is a very motivating and thought-provoking experience. Insight from the authors finds that the more positive interactions a client has with the students, the more the client will want to add to the project purely out of enthusiasm. Or, perhaps conditions change in the organization's environment, and the client suggests shifting the project's direction. This is similar to the concept of 'scope creep' in IT projects (Dey, Kinch, & Ogulana, 2007), and we advise faculty to maintain the scope of the original project, with the agreed-upon constraints, even if the new idea appears promising. There is always the opportunity for the client to hire your students as interns to complete these additional ideas once this client-based project is successfully completed (as we have experienced), or it can be accomplished in a future class' client-based project.

Offering Incentives and Motivating Students

In client-based projects, incentives are often offered as extra motivation for the students to improve outcomes. If the project budget (and department/university) allows, financial incentives or scholarships for the winners have been found to be effective. However, many other options exist. For students who do well, a customized recommendation letter from the client about the student's performance during the project makes a powerful addition to their portfolio. A popular request from students is an automatic A in the course for the best project, but perhaps a more reasonable idea is for the final exam to become optional for the student(s) with the top project. While most students consider client-based projects to be resume-worthy experience, the student(s) with the best project can also list their result as an achievement on their resume. If incentives are offered for the 'top project,' it is important to establish in advance whether this is the project chosen by the client or the highest grade from the instructor.

Competition in the Classroom

When students are competing to have the 'best' project and the stakes are perceived to be high, it is essential for instructors to play close attention to classroom culture. Competitive vibes in the classroom can be very positive, motivating students and even engaging some who otherwise may not be interested. Knowing there will be a 'winner' encourages team members to work together in and out of the classroom while striving for the best outcome. However, extreme competition can limit discussions during class and interaction among students on opposing teams. Instructors must use care in guiding students through healthy competition and maintaining an open dialogue for discussion of course material as it relates to project components.

INSIGHTS ON MOTIVATING STUDENTS

As part of the Marketing Communications project described earlier, a survey was administered upon completion of the project (but prior to announcing winners) to better understand *what motivates students in a client-based project*. Thirty-eight students completed the survey, answering questions about whether three motivators (the fact that the project was ‘real’, engagement with the client, and scholarship for winning team members) motivated them to think more about the project, to work harder on the project, and to spend more time on the project. Key findings include the following averages, based on a 1-7 Likert-style scale of agreement. Students were more motivated to think about the project more because the project was ‘real,’ (mean = 6.01) than they were because of client engagement (mean = 5.50) or the financial incentive (mean = 5.42), although all three did have a clear impact on positively motivating students. The project being ‘real’ also motivated students to work harder (mean = 6.01) and longer (mean = 5.65) on the project than did client engagement (mean = 5.21 for working harder; mean = 4.68 for working longer) or the financial incentive (mean = 5.55 for working harder; mean = 5.16 for working more) although, again, these can still be considered strong motivators.

A takeaway here is how much students value getting this real-world experience. While the client in this case was quite involved, that is not essential in order to motivate students and enrich the learning experience. Nor is offering a financial incentive. While it is clear that incentives are helpful to keep students motivated, the most important piece to them was that the project was based in the real world and allowed them to apply their learning to make a difference. Once they realized they were being trusted to use what they were learning in the course to address an issue that was keeping a CEO up at night, they were engrossed.

DISCUSSION

Integrating a client-based project into a marketing course provides many benefits, which students can easily identify. The following comments are taken directly from students’ self-reflection papers submitted at the completion of a client-based project:

- *The best aspect of this project for me was getting a hands-on experience of what it is like to actually create an IMC plan for a real company. So many times in past projects, I could throw out a couple cool ideas and vague concepts and call it good. For this project, I actually had to plan out realistic implementation of each idea. It challenged me to be more realistic and time-conscious with my ideas. Instead of creating a project from scratch and doing anything you want because you know that the company will never see it, we needed to tailor our ideas to [the client’s] liking throughout the project.*
- *Most courses don’t offer many hands-on real world experiences. Yes, professors share theirs, but I’m a student who learns more with a hands-on approach than a textbook. It is one thing to know concepts and ideas, but it is so different to apply them. So, this project really stood out to me. The idea that we had a real business coming to us for help intrigued me. It forced me to evaluate concepts and ask, “Would this really increase sales, or is it just a fun idea?”*
- *The best aspect of this project was the reality of it all. Working for a CEO of a company and being able to meet with him and share my ideas was amazing. It was like a mini internship.*
- *Being able to think outside of the box and come up with our own ideas and relating these definitions to real life situations was some of the most fun I have had while taking a class. Obviously, the coolest part about the project was the real-life aspect and seeing how an IMC plan can be used in the real world. I found myself working extra hard on this project because I was motivated to do my best to impress [the client]. If this project was not about [the client] and helping the business, I do not know how seriously I would have taken the project. The idea that they were actually going to be using some of our ideas for their store made me work unbelievably harder. I have never been motivated like this for any schoolwork before.*

- *It was really cool seeing how passionate [the client] was with this project. You could really tell that he was putting his heart and soul into this project and that he really wanted to get something out of this. He wasn't coming to us just to help run a group project and expand our knowledge, but he really did trust us and really believed that we could make a difference for him and for his company. It was very cool seeing the expressions on his face after we showed him different parts of our project.*

The client-based project provides a platform for students and their instructor to engage in the material of any marketing course, to delve deeply into examples, and to think critically while making assessments and determining implications of potential outcomes. For clients, this project allows them to receive what many consider to be essentially-free consulting. Clients enjoy the interaction with students and fresh ideas they bring to the table. Additionally, new insights are always gained about their business. While some projects may not produce a “perfect” answer for the company, the feasible solutions that are presented help clients move in the right direction as they continue working in this area. In addition to a rich course-learning experience, the polish and professionalism that students develop as they meet and interact with their client prepares them for what to expect as they begin their careers.

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