

Using a brand revitalization project to develop students' analytical and creativity skills

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ABSTRACT

The skillset that students acquire during college is not always well-aligned and/or well-developed relative to the skills needed to be successful in the business world. Employers have complained for many years that graduating students often lack adequate critical thinking and communication skills, in particular. In the marketing field (and other disciplines), students can also benefit from developing creativity skills.

In an effort to address these concerns, the author has effectively used a brand revitalization project in several marketing courses. Finding ways to revive mature or dying brands requires somewhat of a marriage between art and science. That is, students must develop their creativity via brainstorming and “thinking outside the box,” as well as their analytical and problem solving skills.

An online survey was conducted among a sample of 176 marketing students who completed the brand revitalization project. The results show that the respondents found the group project to be both interesting and enjoyable, enhancing their knowledge of brand strategy. Also, students strongly agreed that the project was helpful in developing their analytical, problem solving, creativity, communication, and teamwork skills.

Keywords: critical thinking, creativity, communication, teamwork

INTRODUCTION

An ongoing challenge in higher education is finding ways to help college students develop key skills that are desired by employers. Two of the most sought after skills involve critical thinking, such as problem solving, and communication (Hopkins, Raymond, and Carlson, 2011; Pefanis and Harich, 2010). Another important skill, particularly in the marketing profession, is creativity (Geissler, Edison, and Wayland, 2012; Laverie, Madhavaram, and McDonald, 2008). For many years, employers have complained that graduating students are often not adequately equipped with these vital skills (e.g., Peter D. Hart Research Associates, Inc., 2008; Ackerman, Gross, and Perner, 2003; Chonko and Roberts, 1996). Despite the complaints, efforts to truly prepare students for the business world still fall short of employer expectations in many cases (Finch, Nadeau, and O'Reilly, 2013).

Therefore, it is extremely important that educators continue to explore, innovate, and implement more effective methods of skill development. One such effort is presented here. Student projects involving a marketing plan have been popular in business education. However, instructing students to develop a plan to specifically revitalize a mature or dying brand is far less common, and documented efforts to do so are virtually nonexistent in the marketing literature. Providing students with a specific focus to identify and detail ways to turnaround a stagnant brand offers a unique challenge that aids the development of analytical skills and creativity.

When brands reach the maturity (i.e., a sales plateau) or sales decline stages of the product life cycle, brand managers should consider a brand revitalization strategy (Kolbl, Konecnik, and Kolar, 2015; Dev and Keller, 2014; Keller, 1999). A key reason that this may be an attractive option is that it is typically much more expensive and risky to launch a new brand than to attempt to revive an existing brand. Research has shown that the decision to invest in efforts to revitalize a brand involves both marketing and financial considerations. The best candidates for successful revitalization are brands with significant residual value in terms of brand equity (i.e., strength, favorability, and uniqueness of brand associations). These brands enjoyed past glory that may still be useful in terms of offering opportunities to enhance brand equity often via repositioning (Shetty, Raghavendra, and Mathew, 2014; Thomas and Kohli, 2009). In fact, many successfully revived brands were premium offerings that were priced accordingly, differentiated, and selectively distributed, resulting in relatively high profit margins (Wansink, 1997).

Along with repositioning, there are several other brand revitalization strategies to consider. Keller (2008) proposed a model that suggests ways to refresh old sources of brand equity and to create new sources of brand equity. Specific strategic alternatives to help increase consumption quantity and frequency include identifying:

- 1) additional opportunities to use the brand in the same basic way.
- 2) completely new and different ways to use the brand.

Alternatives to bolster fading brand associations, neutralize negative associations, and create new associations include:

- 1) retaining vulnerable customers.

- 2) recapturing lost customers.
- 3) identifying neglected segments.
- 4) attracting new customers.

STUDENT PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The author has successfully used the brand revitalization project in several undergraduate and graduate marketing courses, including Product and Service Strategy, Marketing Strategy, Marketing Management, and Brand and Market Consulting. Essentially, any business course that utilizes a project involving a marketing plan is suitable for the project described here, which provides a more focused approach to developing a marketing plan for a mature or dying brand. The specific objectives for using a brand revitalization project are to:

- 1) develop critical thinking (e.g., problem solving) skills.
- 2) stimulate creativity.
- 3) involve students in a real world situation.
- 4) provide another opportunity for teamwork.
- 5) promote effective communication skills (written and oral).
- 6) further develop brand strategy knowledge.

The project begins by assigning students to small teams (no larger than 4 students per team). Research has indicated that smaller group sizes help to increase the effectiveness of groups (e.g., McCorkle, et al, 1999). Each team then selects a brand (e.g., physical product, or service) that is in a mature stage or sales decline stage. That is, the brand's sales have either leveled off or decreased for at least a couple of years. Students are encouraged to select a brand in a product category that is interesting to them. They seem to put forth more effort when they are highly interested in the brand (Geissler, 2002).

Students are then instructed to develop a marketing plan to stimulate sales and revitalize the brand. Conducting a thorough situation analysis is key to developing an effective marketing plan. In planning a marketing strategy, one needs to know where the brand has been and where it is now in order to best know where it needs to head in the future. The situation analysis involves an examination of the nature of the brand and its industry, along with its history. Customer target markets and competitors are also analyzed. A SWOT analysis is very useful for comparing the brand's strengths and weaknesses to those of key competitors and for identifying market opportunities and threats.

After the situation analysis is completed, students must provide sales and market share objectives for the next three years. These objectives may be found when gathering information about the brand. For example, interviews with CEOs sometimes reveal brand objectives. If these objectives are not easily accessible to the public, students are instructed to take on the role of the brand manager and develop their own brand objectives, based on their situation analysis.

Students are then tasked with finding creative ways to stimulate brand sales. Brainstorming techniques are useful in facilitating the creative process. The framework for this effort is the marketing mix (i.e., the 4 Ps of marketing – product, price, place, and promotion). Teams are instructed to analyze current marketing strategies and decide

whether these efforts are appropriate or need to be changed or improved. For example, is the product's positioning appropriate? Or, does the brand need to be repositioned?

Finally, a control and review plan must be presented. This is to ensure that marketing plan objectives are met in a timely manner. A copy of the project assignment is included in the Appendix.

TEACHING METHOD ASSESSMENT

An online survey was conducted via SurveyMonkey among students who completed the brand revitalization project. A total sample of 176 students who participated in the project in various courses completed the questionnaire. The survey included questions to gauge students' level of interest and enjoyment in conducting the project. Along with measuring whether students thought they have gained more brand strategy knowledge, the effectiveness of specific skill development (e.g., critical thinking, communication, and creative skills) and associated techniques (e.g., brainstorming, role playing) was also assessed. A 5-point Likert scale was used to measure the students' level of agreement or disagreement with numerous statements concerning the project.

RESEARCH RESULTS

As shown in Table 1, the students were favorably disposed to the brand revitalization project. Nearly everyone agreed or strongly agreed that the project was interesting (95%) and enjoyable (95%). Just over nine of ten respondents strongly agreed that the project enhanced their brand strategy knowledge.

With regard to specific skill development and technique usefulness, the statements that yielded the highest level of agreement involved the project aiding the development of analytical skills (97%) and effective problem solving (96%). There was also strong agreement that the project helped develop teamwork skills (94%). Agreement that the project helped develop creative skills (90%) and was an effective use of brainstorming techniques (92%) and role playing (93%) was slightly lower, albeit still quite high. Respondents also tended to agree that the project helped develop their written communication (80%) and oral communication (77%).

DISCUSSION

The research results clearly indicate that marketing students not only felt that the brand revitalization project increased their brand strategy knowledge, but also that they believed it helped them to further develop skills that are valued by employers. In particular, the project was thought to be very effective in aiding the development of analytical, problem solving, and teamwork skills.

Creative skills were also improved, according to the respondents. For example, a key aspect of brainstorming involved considering numerous ideas from team members. Initially, students were instructed to be open to all ideas, regardless of how "crazy" or unconventional they may have seemed. This nonjudgmental approach encouraged students to freely express their most creative thoughts. As the project progressed, team members were allowed to be more critical in order to ultimately select the best ideas.

Although most students agreed that the project helped develop their written and oral communication skills, the somewhat lower levels of agreement were likely the result of less involvement in the actual report writing and presentation among some of the team members. This result may also indicate that students were somewhat less confident in their communication skills.

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APPENDIX

Table 1 – Student Survey - Key Results
(n = 176)

Group Project Assessment Abbreviated Statements	Strongly Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)
Interesting project	1	2	2	12	83
Enjoyable project	1	2	2	16	79
Enhanced knowledge of brand strategy	1	0	2	6	91
Aided in development of analytical skills	1	0	2	8	89
Effective problem solving exercise	1	0	3	9	87
Helped develop creative skills	2	4	4	20	70
Effective use of brainstorming techniques	2	2	4	18	74
Effective use of role playing	2	3	2	25	68
Helped develop written communication skills	5	7	8	21	59
Helped develop oral communication skills	3	9	11	17	60
Helped develop teamwork skills	1	3	2	14	80

Group Project Assignment

Requirements:

Your team will be required to turn in a double-spaced report (15-page minimum) by the last day of class. It is recommended that you use tables, figures, illustrations, etc. Please number and refer to all tables and figures in the text. Also, you should have a list of references.

Project Summary:

Your team will be responsible for identifying a physical product or service in the mature or sales decline stage of the product life cycle. You will then develop a marketing plan for stimulating sales of the product or service. The marketing plan should consider the topics outlined below.

I. Executive Summary – This is a one-page summary of the plan's most important points (restricted to a statement of objectives and the principle strategies to achieve them).

II. Situation Analysis

- A. Background – This section should provide general information about the firm marketing the product, when it was first introduced, and what led to its introduction. Past sales levels (units and dollars) for the entire product category and your product should be reviewed. If possible, provide a profitability history for your product. What are the predicted sales levels? Describe the target market and its size (past, present, and future). Are there new target markets that this product could be reaching?
- B. Competition – Describe who the competitors are, size of market they have, and how they are positioned. It would be a good idea to include a brief table showing the market share positions and sales trends over the past three years of the major competitors.
- C. Strengths and Weaknesses – What are the brand's strengths and weaknesses relative to those of key competitors?
- D. Opportunities and Problems – List the key areas of opportunity from which you expect the product to obtain its growth or sales objectives. Also, outline the major factors that might jeopardize the product's ability to meet its objectives. What steps have been taken to minimize these risks?

III. Sales and Market Share Objectives – What are the sales and market share objectives for the next three years?

IV. Marketing Program

- A. Product – Describe the product in detail (branding, packaging, etc.) and compare it with existing products. How is the product positioned? What product modifications, if any, do you suggest? Why? If you feel that the product should not be modified, explain why not. Are there new uses for the product? What are future product objectives and strategies to reach these objectives?
- B. Pricing Strategy – Describe the pricing strategy (e.g., skimming vs. penetration) and compare it to those of competitive products. A chart comparing products and their prices would be helpful. What is the retailer mark-up? Are quantity discounts given to retailers? Is the pricing strategy in line with the product's positioning? Should the pricing strategy be modified? Why/Why not? What are the pricing objectives and strategies to achieve these objectives?
- C. Distribution – Describe how the product is distributed to the retailer. For example, does the firm have its own salesforce? Also, describe the type of stores that carry the product and any services they offer. Are there any changes to the current distribution strategy that you would recommend? Why? What are the distribution objectives and strategies to achieve these objectives?
- D. Promotion – This section should include a description of the advertising, sales promotions (e.g., free samples, contests), publicity, and personal selling used to promote the product. Examples or descriptions of ads may be used. How much is the firm spending to promote (advertising media and sales promotions) the product? If possible, show the spending levels for your product and the competition over the last three years. How much are the major competitors spending? Are the promotions in line with the product's positioning? Are the promotions helping to build the brand franchise? What changes would you make? What are the promotion objectives and strategies to achieve these objectives?

V. Control and Review – How and when will the marketing plan be reviewed to ensure that the objectives are being met?