BRINGING CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION INTO THE MARKETING CLASSROOMS

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports personal experiences in developing and teaching a course in business creativity and innovation as well as introducing these concepts into other marketing courses. The paper's intent is to encourage academic colleagues to introduce the concepts of creativity and innovation into their marketing curriculum. The ideas of creativity and innovation as well as the creative process are reviewed.

INTRODUCTION

A key to developing effective marketing graduates is to instill the competency to be effective problem-solvers. Business and marketing curriculums utilize case studies, simulations, problem sets, internships, and other pedagogical activities to develop critical problem solving skills. However, our academic curriculums fall short of teaching students to be creative in their problem solving. All too often, students, as individuals or as groups, develop uninspiring alternatives to marketing problems. With a solution so dependent on this set of sub-optimal alternatives, it's apparent we are not preparing our students to be competent problem solvers. Business students need to be creative, as well as critical thinkers as they approach problem solving tasks. This paper reports my experience in developing and teaching a course in creativity and innovation as well as introducing these concepts into other marketing courses.

A review of marketing textbooks suggested that we have ignored the concepts of creativity and innovation. Other than the obligatory sections on new product development, textbooks have ignored this concept. One textbook by Dickson (1997) included an appendix on creative problem solving while another Rao and Steckel (1997) devoted two pages to creativity. However, a library literature search, a cruise through the internet, and a trip to a bookstore provided a substantial knowledge base for creativity and innovation. This information was supportive of the premise that creativity can be developed and is very important in the business world today. The next step was to design an experimental summer course that not only taught creativity but was delivered in a creative learning environment. In the summer of 1997, “Business Creativity and Innovation” was born. The course utilized a “hands on” experiential format where students learned through “doing” the concepts. In addition, there was a careful effort to create a course culture that maximizes the creative and innovative processes. The course description was as follows: The business person’s secret for creating value in the market place is applying creativity and innovation to solve problems and to make use of opportunities that people face every day. The course focuses on three business issues where creative and innovative skill will be useful.
- business problem solving,
- product/service development, and
- business negotiation.

In developing the course, the following objectives were set.
- develop skills in generating new and original ideas
- increase ability to move ideas into action and success
- increase knowledge and skill in creative problem solving as applied to business settings

The “rules” of the course to guide learning were Swanson’s (1997) five creative habits:
Think contrary - If the consensus is “yes,” ask “why not no?” If the trend is to add more product functions, why not fewer?
Challenge the obvious - Next time someone says, “obviously,” ask yourself if it really is.
Value ideas - Don’t apologize by saying its just an idea.
Be solution-minded - Products are solutions to problems. Therefore, all problems are opportunities for creative product development.
Think laterally - Define the problem accurately. The disease is not the problem, it’s the symptom. What
caused the disease is the problem. Now find more than one solution to the problem; that's lateral thinking.

To meet these objectives and to apply the rules, class meetings used exercises designed to "loosen-up" the thinking process. Individual and group warm-up were crucial to the success of this course. Additionally, various creativity techniques were introduced into the course when needed to assist the development of one's creativity. While much of the course content was focused on creativity, the outcome of the course depended on how well the learner could apply this creative energy into some type of innovation. The major requirement of the course was to use creativity to produce innovation. This innovation project may well include any of the following alternatives.

- Taking a novel approach
- Devising or modifying a process or system
- Inventing a new product or service
- Finding new uses or existing things
- Improving things
- Inventing or redefining a concept

In summary, I am able to report that these adventures were the most gratifying experiences I have had in over 26 years of college teaching. I want to encourage my colleagues to contemplate how creativity can be an important aspect of the marketing curriculum. Particularly, I want to challenge them to offer a course in business creativity and innovation or insert modules into existing courses. I can guarantee that the experience will be rewarding and the outcome will be the development of more effective problem solving skills. Also, both faculty and students can expect to be energized by the experience.

**NOW, THE REST OF THE OF THE STORY....**

This paper offers a solid starting point for colleagues to develop what they may want to do with the concepts of creativity and innovation. With this knowledge, my creative colleagues can move forward to develop their own learning environments for arming business students with creativity and innovation skills. The following sections review the concepts of creativity and innovation as well as to summarize the creative process. However, I have deliberately stopped short of describing how a course or teaching modules should be organized. Surely, we are talking about creativity and innovation! The way I went about the initial offering of Business Creativity and innovation may bear little resemblance to subsequent offerings.

**A Primer on the Concepts of Creativity and Innovation**

The Chinese word for business is "sheng-yi". The term is from the combination of two characters which literally mean "to give birth to ideas." The job of business is to conceive ideas, nurture them to birth and help them grow. The essence of the term, "sheng-yi", suggests that business is a lively, artistic, creative, vigorous, daring, and imaginative activity (Swanson 1997).

Creativity is the ability to develop new ideas and to discover new ways of looking at problems and opportunities (Zimmerer and Scarborough 1996). Carr and Johansson (1995) note that very simply, we define creativity as the generation of ideas and alternatives, and innovation as the transformation of those ideas and alternatives into useful applications that lead to change and improvement. In today's business environment, one must be able to manage at the speed of change, and that takes creativity and innovation.

**The Trap for Neglecting Creativity.** In western societies, people seem to assign certain universal human abilities, like creativity, to a subset of the population (i.e. artists musicians, architects) making it more difficult for all members of society to see themselves as creative. This is a myth that needs to be refuted. Everyone is intuitively creative and has a talent to solve problems; however, these skills often are stifled instead of encouraged (Kern 1997). The problem is that in many organizations, people have never been taught - or even expected - to be creative. Restricted by their traditional thinking patterns, most people never tap into their pools of innate creativity (Zimmerer and Scarborough 1996).

Creativity, just like intelligence and height, is normally distributed over the population. Different people have different levels of creativity, much like anything else that is a skill. However, everybody can be creative if they want to be. Similar to a muscle, creativity responds to exercise. The more you use it, the stronger it gets. Most, if not all people, are
creative to various extents. Its just that some people act on their ideas and others ignore them.

**Escaping the Trap by Recognizing the Payoff.** Harvard's Theodore Levitt says that creativity is thinking new things and innovation is doing new things. Having a great new idea, period, is not enough. Something has to happen (Netlon 1985). Some ideas are totally new, such as the airplane, while other ideas are just putting old things together in new ways. A research team put together the CAT scanner by using X-ray technology, computing and a $15,000 budget. The Japanese have a much better grasp of creativity. The incremental improvements with miniature radios and compact cars perfected by the Japanese forever altered their industries. American companies could do little more than try to play catch-up (Frederick 1997).

Successful businesses come up with ideas and then find ways to make them work to solve a problem or to fill a need. In a recent survey, 81% of chief executives said innovation and creativity are the keys to the growth of their organizations, but only 4% considered their companies proficient in these areas (Kern 1997). Clearly, it becomes the responsibility of our business schools to be a facilitator of developing these dormant creativity skills.

Colleges need to pay more attention to enhancing the abilities of creativity and innovativeness in our graduates. The integration of creativity into our curriculum can transform the traditional business school problem solving to a more effective creative problem solving model. As de Bono (1992) points out, successful companies soon will not only have to be competitive, but must also create value monopolies. He shows how creativity is necessary to generate those value monopolies. Schools of business and management can unleash this dormant human ability known as creativity. If a core objective of business education is to develop the problem solving process, then it becomes imperative to introduce creativity and innovation techniques into the process.

**The Creative Process.** A creative process, described by Ruggiero (1994), is a four step process that optimizes the possibility of producing good ideas. These steps form the cornerstone for teaching creative marketing problem solving in the classroom.

1. **Searching for Challenges.** A key point of Ruggiero's discussion is the need to regain our curiosity. As adult problem-solvers, we need to be more like children. Children are naturally inquisitive. They study ordinary things intently - a blade of grass, a spoon, a face - and have a sense of wonder about the things that most of us take for granted. Then they ask and ask and ask. Shouldn't business people be encouraged to ask questions such as:
   - Why does our product look the way it does?
   - Why is our product packaged the way it is?
   - Why don't kitchen faucets have foot pedals?
   - Why don't they put gas caps on both sides of your car so that no matter what side of the gasoline pump you park on, you'll never have to pull the hose around to the other side?
   Source: (Ruggiero 1994)

2. **Expressing the Problem.** Since all problems have solutions, it's critical that you define your problems correctly (Foster 1996). A problem is a situation that we regard as unacceptable. Deciding what action will change the situation for the best is often started by the question, "How can I...". This allows the process of examining the challenge, expressing the problem and refining your expression of the problem. The benefits of careful expression helps to move beyond the familiar and habitual, keeps your thinking flexible, and opens many lines of thought.

3. **Investigating the Problem.** The way many people actually carryout their investigation involves little or no thinking - which is why their investigation is so often unproductive (Ruggiero 1994). The discipline of carrying out this investigation involves knowing the key sources of information. First, individuals need to recognize the wealth of information that they have accumulated by using insights to link "silos" of information. People around you can also provide quality information. The act of questioning others can stimulate thinking and assist in recalling relevant experiences. Successful questioning depends not only on your ability to ask the right question at the right time but also on your willingness to listen at other times to open yourself to the person's experience.

4. **Producing Ideas.** Foolish people think of a single solution to a problem and then proceed as if
that solution had to be creative. But creative ideas, like pearls, occur infrequently. So sensible people produce many ideas before expecting to find a creative one (Ruggiero 1994). Researchers have found a clear relationship between the number of ideas produced and the quality of ideas. Simply stated: “The best way to get a good idea is to get a lot of ideas...” At first, ideas seem as hard to find as crumbs on an oriental rug. Then they start coming in bunches. When they do, don’t stop to analyze them; if you do, you’ll stop the flow, the rhythm, the magic. Write them down and go onto the next one. Analysis is for later.” (Foster 1995). The key to creative success is to generate as many solutions, concepts, and ideas or approaches as possible. A number of suitable business problem solving techniques can be used that takes idea generation into the “zone” of truly creative solutions. For example, I used the following exercise in class to illustrate this point.

Problem: In the shortest possible time, develop a list of new uses for a metal ball bearing (you could easily substitute other objects such as a soda can, a paper clip, or a brick).

The first 5-10 ideas suggested were quite ordinary. But then, I challenged them to come up with 50 ideas. After an initial struggle, groups were formed and the ideas started to pour out. Some groups didn’t want to stop with 50. If students are able to do this with a metal ball bearing, think what they might do in an advertising or product development situation.

SUMMARY

For those who are intrigued by the ideas expressed in this paper, what now? A good starting point might be to log onto the internet, use creativity and innovation as the key words and start the search. In addition to the net, four books that stood as the cornerstone of knowledge for my learning experience are by Foster (1996), Higgins (1994), Ruggiero (1991), and Vance and Deacon (1995). But, be forewarned. It is quite probable that you will be spending an inordinate amount of time as you start to creatively develop your expertise on this fascinating and vital block of knowledge for business education and industry application.

REFERENCES


Koberg, Don and Jim Bagnell (1980), The Universal Traveler, Los Altos, CA.


Contact the author for a summary of techniques, exercises, project ideas, as well as a sample of internet resources, books and articles.