THE BENEFITS AND SUBSTANTIATION OF UTILIZING A CLIENT BASED, MARKETING PLAN PROJECT APPROACH FOR THE INTRODUCTION TO NON-PROFIT MARKETING COURSE

Les Harman, Biola University, 13800 Biola Ave., La Mirada, CA, 90639 (310-903-4770)

ABSTRACT

The position of this paper is to examine the optimal delivery system in the teaching of the introductory course in non-profit marketing. It is proposed that an individual, client based project approach entailing the complete development of a customized one year marketing plan for an existing local Non-Profit Organization (NPO), be utilized. The development of the marketing plan is the primary driving force of the class structure. Lectures and specific project related assignments on non-profit marketing theory and strategy are utilized in explaining and substantiating each of the various sections of the non-profit marketing plan process.

THE NEED(S) OF THE NON-PROFIT INDUSTRY

A common dilemma of marketing professors, regardless of the course taught, is determining the optimum way of maximizing the course. As teaching objectives for the marketing course are developed, it is suggested that decisions on course content and optimal delivery system be in adherence to the marketing concept. Therefore, in regard to teaching the introductory course in non-profit marketing, these teaching objectives would be based on the "needs" that exist for the business student and in the non-profit industry.

The non-profit industry is unique in regard to their expectations of entry level marketing graduates. Due to radical changes and down sizing in the industry as well as increased competition for limited funds, non-profit administrators have been put in the position to hire marketers with a wide span of responsibility. However, graduates are often unprepared for the unstructured management culture and decision making protocol that exists in a majority of small to medium size non-profit organizations.

The suggested project approach meets many of the identified needs in the non-profit industry. First is the need to provide experience in "real world" non-profit situations prior to graduation. One may read all the books in the world about bicycle riding, but only when one actually gets up on a bicycle (Cunningham 1995) can they fully understand the challenge. In order to increase the probability of developing competent "non-profit" managers, graduating business students need real experience and confidence in making important marketing decisions in the "non-profit" sector. Graduates are often not adequately ready for the wide range of marketing responsibility they are assigned in small to medium sized NPO's. The unconventional management structure is not typical of the "for-profit" organizations that they have usually studied in their business education. In this very competitive and ever-changing non-profit environment, NPO's are no longer in need of inexperienced graduates with "good intentions," but marketers with experience in the non-profit industry and the ability to make sound decisions in typically unstructured non-profit organizations.

Since most business students are in need of practical experience during the traditional college marketing education, where better to implement it than by the introduction to NPO marketing course? Although some form of project(s) may be standard in the average introductory non-profit course, it is usually not to the degree, nor the benefit derived, that the author is suggesting. Many non-profit texts and suggested course delivery are primarily centered around non-profit cases. Although the study of NPO's through case studies is valuable for strategic thinking, the case approach often deals with larger, more structured organizations that students may not be hired as marketing managers until they have had many years of experience. Furthermore, the case approach does not include the vital experience of actually communicating and developing interpersonal relationships in the business atmosphere that exists in the project approach.

The second major need suggested by non-profit administrators is for competent business graduates that have a desire to make an impact in their communities. Students educated in the discipline of marketing have the potential to make more substantive contributions to business and society than do many of today's students who are versed in little else besides applying the Four P's in a consumer package goods context (Smith 1991). It is an additional responsibility of the business faculty teaching the non-profit course to guarantee the unique experience of community service using their marketing knowledge and training. Even if business students are have been involved in other marketing projects and/or internships, this comprehensive project approach allows students to have a thorough experience in the non-profit sector.
The majority of graduating business students are not attracted to the non-profit industry for a variety of reasons. Not-for-Profit careers maintained one of the lowest rating in regard to marketing careers for likelihood of pursuit, prestige and information, indicating that career education may be needed (Anderson 1992). This is often due to their own misconceptions of NPO’s as well as perhaps their own desire for material growth that they believe only exists in the ‘for-profit’ sector. Regardless of the reason, unless graduating students have already experienced first hand the development of, for example, their marketing plan, they may never fully understand the non-profit industry for what it has to uniquely offer. Therefore, the project approach can become (and has been) an excellent avenue for promoting careers in the non-profit sector.

THE OBJECTIVES OF UTILIZING THE NON-PROFIT MARKETING PLAN APPROACH

A. One of the primary benefits and objectives of preparing a non-profit marketing plan is precisely its assistance in producing legitimate experience for future business managers. Students gain their real-world marketing experience in identifying many different “needs” of the organization through internal and external research. Based on this information, they apply non-profit marketing principles in the development of their various recommendations. The fact that the student must address all areas of the comprehensive non-profit marketing plan allows the student to experience the non-profit organization from the top to bottom.

B. A second objective is to stress to both the student and the NPO the value of planning, e.g., better communication throughout the organization, identification of expected developments and a seasonal action plan. This also includes focusing of effort, identifying strengths and weaknesses, and developing marketing strategies with consideration for actual opportunities and threats (Lovelock & Weinberg 1989).

C. The third objective is the experience of learning the skill of creating options prior to making business decisions. There is a minimum of 35 different business strategic marketing decisions that must be made in order to complete the non-profit plan. Business schools are frequently criticized for focusing too much attention on theories and concepts and not enough attention on communication, decision making and other skills that are at least as important to career success as content knowledge (Lamb Jr., 1995). Business graduates working their first job are often reluctant to recommend changes at their respective place of employment primarily due to a lack of confidence and experience. Although this hesitation may have merit, the process of decision making can be taught. For example, it is advised that students not take their first idea for a strategy and automatically establish it as one of their recommendations. Instead, the students are instructed to take the time to create options for each major strategy from which they and/or their client can choose the best direction. From this approach of creating additional options, students are taught the value of developing choices and seeking guidance for everything they do.

D. An additional goal is to teach the integration of the many facets of NPO into a simultaneous coordination of marketing activities. The process of developing the non-profit marketing plan clearly shows the inter-relationships between marketing and fund raising strategies, the power of the board of directors, the chosen positioning strategy, etc.

E. Also, students will learn and experience the dilemma of dealing with the constraints of real budgets and the compromises that follow. This is designed to avoid ridiculous and somewhat embarrassing recommendations that are not based on the reality of an organization’s legitimate budget.

F. To teach creativity in the non-profit sector is an objective for the non-profit marketing plan approach. Creativity is not only reserved for the promotion section of the marketing plan. It is critical that they (students) understand the relationship between creativity and organizational environments (Ramocki 1994). Furthermore, the reality of extremely limited budgets forces students to design creative strategies that will benefit the organization.

G. The last objective mentioned is to create a “user-friendly” document that can be implemented with a reasonable amount of work. This means that the action plan is clear, conveys the various steps that must be taken, and is designed uniquely for the client’s organization. This also implies that the document has been thoroughly explained to the client so that he or she can feel confident that they have a good understanding of the recommendations.

TEACHING SUGGESTIONS AND RESPECTIVE ASSIGNMENTS

Step 1. Decide on Non-Profit Industry. On the first day of class, assignment #1 is given for finding a client to work with for the project.

- The first step is to have students consider what
The majority of graduating business students are not attracted to the non-profit industry for a variety of reasons. Not-for-Profit careers maintained one of the lowest ratings in regard to marketing careers for likelihood of pursuit, prestige, and information, indicating that career education may be needed (Anderson 1992). This is often due to their own misconceptions of NPO’s as well as perhaps their own desire for material growth that they believe only exists in the ‘for-profit’ sector. Regardless of the reason, unless graduating students have already experienced first hand the development of, for example, their marketing plan, they may never fully understand the non-profit industry for what it has to uniquely offer. Therefore, the project approach can become (and has been) an excellent avenue for promoting careers in the non-profit sector.

THE OBJECTIVES OF UTILIZING THE NON-PROFIT MARKETING PLAN APPROACH

A. One of the primary benefits and objectives of preparing a non-profit marketing plan is precisely its assistance in producing legitimate experience for future business managers. Students gain their real-world marketing experience in identifying many different “needs” of the organization through internal and external research. Based on this information, they apply non profit marketing principles in the development of their various recommendations. The fact that the student must address all areas of the comprehensive non-profit marketing plan allows the student to experience the non-profit organization from the top to bottom.

B. A second objective is to stress to both the student and the NPO the value of planning, e.g., better communication throughout the organization, identification of expected developments and a seasonal action plan. This also includes focusing of effort, identifying strengths and weaknesses, and developing marketing strategies with consideration for actual opportunities and threats (Lovelock & Weinberg 1989).

C. The third objective is the experience of learning the skill of creating options prior to making business decisions. There is a minimum of 35 different business strategic marketing decisions that must be made in order to complete the non-profit plan. Business schools are frequently criticized for focusing too much attention on theories and concepts and not enough attention on communication, decision making, and other skills that are at least as important to career success as content knowledge (Lamb Jr., 1995). Business graduates working their first job are often reluctant to recommend changes at their respective place of employment primarily due to a lack of confidence and experience. Although this hesitation may have merit, the process of decision making can be taught. For example, it is advised that students not take their first idea for a strategy and automatically establish it as one of their recommendations. Instead, the students are instructed to take the time to create options for each major strategy from which they and/or their client can choose the best direction. From this approach of creating additional options, students are taught the value of developing choices and seeking guidance for everything they do.

D. An additional goal is to teach the integration of the many facets of NPO into a simultaneous coordination of marketing activities. The process of developing the non-profit marketing plan clearly shows the inter-relationships between marketing and fund raising strategies, the power of the board of directors, the chosen positioning strategy, etc.

E. Also, students will learn and experience the dilemma of dealing with the constraints of real budgets and the compromises that follow. This is designed to avoid ridiculous and somewhat embarrassing recommendations that are not based on the reality of an organization’s legitimate budget.

F. To teach creativity in the non-profit sector is an objective for the non-profit marketing plan approach. Creativity is not only reserved for the promotion section of the marketing plan. It is critical that they (students) understand the relationship between creativity and organizational environments (Ramocki 1994). Furthermore, the reality of extremely limited budgets forces students to design creative strategies that will benefit the organization.

G. The last objective mentioned is to create a “user-friendly” document that can be implemented with a reasonable amount of work. This means that the action plan is clear, conveys the various steps that must be taken, and is designed uniquely for the client’s organization. This also implies that the document has been thoroughly explained to the client so that he or she can feel confident that they have a good understanding of the recommendations.

TEACHING SUGGESTIONS AND RESPECTIVE ASSIGNMENTS

Step 1. Decide on Non-Profit Industry. On the first day of class, assignment #1 is given for finding a client to work with for the project.

• The first step is to have students consider what
non-profit “industry,” charity organization(s) and/or social issues they already have personal interest in and/ or perhaps empathize strongly with. It is a fact that students will do a far better job if they feel personally involved with its success. It is the intent of the instructor that the student will “takes ownership” of the project as they will want to see their organization flourish, as opposed to the completion of “just another paper.”

- In regard to project leads for finding appropriate clients, the teacher may want to keep an updated notebook of “Project Leads” which contains names of NPO’s that have expressed interest in marketing assistance, projects and internships used in the past, articles about local NPO’s, library listings of NPO’s and charities, etc. This notebook can be used to stimulate ideas and provide options for the students to consider. Other sources for project may be the local volunteer center and university community service office which are often aware of a wide range of local organizations. If there is still some difficulty in finding willing and appropriate NPO clients in the local area, students may work to form group teams. However, the author strongly encourages individual and off-campus projects so clients can have the experience of working with new situations and be removed from the safety net that school can provide.

Step 2 Contact prospective clients. Students are encouraged to call at least five potential clients for an initial interview. It is recommended to avoid utilizing a standard questionnaire at this point as clients may not be comfortable disclosing structured information over the phone. Two things are emphasized to students in regard to contacting prospective clients. One, that a contact person established, who has marketing authority and is willing to meet with them and speak with them on several occasions on the phone over the semester. The second item is to work with organizations that want ‘help.’ If potential clients are defensive initially and feel threatened, then it is usually recommended to look elsewhere. The real success of the project will come from full disclosure from the client in identifying weaknesses and needs, so that the plan will be of real value.

Step 3 Select and meet with client – project assignment #1. Students need to take a copy of their non-profit marketing plan with them when interviewing with potential clients. The primary purpose of this initial meeting is to set reasonable, mutual expectations for the coming months. It should be stressed at this time that although all sections of the marketing plan must be considered, there will be sections that are of more pressing need to the client in which emphasis can be directed. This should definitely be conveyed to the client by the student at this initial meeting.

Step 4 Get instructor approval. The instructor is looking for such items as: Is the project too broad or not substantial enough? Most importantly, confirm that it is indeed a non-profit organization.

Step 5 Secondary research – project assignment #2. The purpose of this assignment is to familiarize and update the student on the non-profit industry in which their client organization is categorized. The assignment calls for the student to photocopy and turn in a minimum of ten relevant articles/industry data surrounding the external marketing environment.

Step 6 Conduct non-profit marketing audit – project assignment #3. The student needs to make a face to face appointment with the client to complete the initial marketing audit. The purpose of this assignment is to further understand the organization with emphasis on the internal marketing environment of the organization. An excellent example of a complete non-profit marketing audit can be found in the text, Public & Nonprofit Marketing (Lovelock 1989). Due to the amount of potential questions that may or may not be applicable for the scope of the project, students are instructed to pick the ten most relevant questions from the marketing audit in the suggested text. Next to each of the ten questions, the student should explain “why” that particular question was asked and briefly write the client’s response. The purpose of this assignment is to ensure that all questions are relevant to the needs of the organization, and questions can be customized for the individual project meeting. This assignment is an exercise in preparedness and professionalism that should be learned and practiced in college and used consistently in the business world. By completion of the last two assignments, the student should have sufficient information in which to complete the situation analysis and S.W.O.T. sections of the marketing plan.

Step 7 Develop marketing objectives for client organization. As a result of the research, marketing audit, meetings with the client and various lectures, the student can begin creating/developing the annual marketing objectives for the period covering the annual marketing plan.

Step 8 Develop ten point plan objectives for your term project – project assignment #4. At this point in the class, the student needs to set goals and establish a “game-plan” for what he/she can feasibly complete in the remaining part of the term. This is not for the client organization, but simply ten items that are unique to their project that must be accomplished in order to complete the project.

Step 9 Develop internal and external marketing strategies. Class time during the term has been split between unique features of NPO’s and the various sections of the non-profit marketing plan. As these sec-
tions are discussed in class and read in the text, students should begin writing the marketing strategies in their non-profit marketing plan. Greater emphasis is on the internal marketing strategies as these activities are less expensive, can be implemented quickly and can have immediate impact.

Step 10 Write public service announcement (PSA) – project assignment #5. The assignment is to write up an actual PSA in the correct format for the best available newspaper that matches the target market for the services provided. The newspaper must be contacted and all PSA request(s) must be in exactly the correct form and deadlines considered. Furthermore, the PSA should be coordinated with other promotion and/or fund raising strategies and must be approved by the client. The PSA assignment is then graded, returned, edited and put in the proper section of the marketing plan.

Step 11 Meet with client – discuss marketing and fund raising strategies. In addition to telephone conversations, another meeting with the client must take place at this time to discuss marketing strategies as well as conduct the fund raising audit. Students are requested to ask for a copy of the NPO’s most recent grant letter requests in which to build upon for their proposed grant letter.

Step 12 Develop internal and external fund raising strategies. As a result of the fund raising audit meeting and related lectures, the students should begin the development of the internal and external fund raising strategies. Again, greater emphasis is put on developing internal strategies, such as personal letter campaigns that utilize the existing contacts within the client NPO. In regard to external fund raising strategies, the non-profit plan calls for listing 25 “new” potential donors that match the organizations’ giving requirements with their client’s service organization.

Step 13 Write new grant letter request – project assignment #5. Students should attach a copy of the client organization’s most recent grant letter request with the students’ proposed grant letter request. It is a good idea to have each student bring in enough copies of their proposed grant request to distribute to the other students in order to discuss and to identify strengths and weaknesses. The grant letter is then again graded, returned, edited and put in the proper section of the marketing plan.

Step 14 Prepare non-profit marketing plan. In regard to this step, the student prepares the management summary, has the plan edited, revised and then should make every effort to ‘professionalize’ the final copy. Since it is the author’s objective that each final marketing plan be the best it possibly can, the students are informed from the beginning of the term that they can turn in their plan before the due date in which they will receive suggested changes. This is beneficial in avoiding any negative surprises, and therefore has worked well in identifying major weaknesses that would have lowered both the students’ grade and the overall value of the plan. Furthermore, it has often been proved that if students had completed just one more additional edit of the plan, the final result would be greatly improved.

Step 15 Oral presentation to class and client. The last days of class are devoted to a relatively short student oral presentation which summarizes their internal, external and fund raising recommendations. Students are encouraged to make a face to face appointment with their client in order to review recommendations and answer any questions regarding the plan.

Further Teaching Recommendations

It is strongly recommended that students be constantly reminded by the faculty that the ‘needs’ of the client are more important than additional unnecessary “text” to impress the instructor.

It is essential to set goals and deadlines for each major step and sub-step. In addition to the above mentioned assignments, there are “weekly objectives” and “weekly accomplishments” handouts which are listed out by the students and discussed during class time when appropriate. The purpose of this is learning to plan the necessary small steps as well as the large ones. This serves as an opportunity for students and faculty to provide encouragement and take the time to help and learn from one another. It allows students to view the other client organizations as “five” marketing cases that unfold during the semester. This discussion time also allows students to realize that they are all facing similar hurdles and frustrations.

In regard to the grading criteria, each single part of the plan is graded and given an appropriate score based on the maximum number of points per section. The recommendations sections based on new information are given more weight than situations analysis sections that are based primarily on answers already known by the client.

It is also important that the student follow through with his or her own recommendations. For example, if he or she recommended an advertisement in the local newspaper for an upcoming event, then it is the responsibility of the student to call the newspaper, check the rates and convey this information in the plan and specifically the marketing budget.
ADVANTAGES OF THE MARKETING PLAN
PROJECT APPROACH

The marketing plan process provides direct interaction with NPO administrators/managers as well as their respective personalities and management styles. Students are able to see first hand the various responsibilities, dilemmas, successes and failures that non profit decision makers must deal with on a daily basis. In addition, the completed marketing plan serves as an opportunity to promote each respective university in their community. From this service, the university, the community, the students and the business faculty will benefit. Another advantage is the opportunity for a future internship or an employment position. A number of students have found that their marketing plan project has eventually turned into a part-time and even a full-time position. The student has proved themselves through their ability to work with the organization and therefore has lowered the risk to the organization of hiring an unknown individual. The largest advantage is the direct benefit to the various organizations. The marketing plan has forced the client organization to re-evaluate their marketing and fund raising strategies. As a result, the student has discovered insights and recommendations that can have immediate positive impact for the organization.

DISADVANTAGES OF THE MARKETING PLAN
STUDENT APPROACH

Perhaps the biggest disadvantage of the marketing plan approach is for the student who doesn’t find an appropriate client in a timely manner and never really “gets out of the gate.” This problem snowballs as the student gets behind and rarely ever catches up. Since every step is built upon the previous step, once students get behind they become very discouraged, as do the clients. The second largest disadvantage stems from clients who have either unclear or unrealistic expectations for the student. This is often demonstrated by difficulty in finding time to meet, being defensive to recommendations, and passing the student on to someone else in the organization. Another disadvantage is the reality that the student may never see their marketing plan implemented. Furthermore, they are not available to discuss potential contingency plans. Finally, there is the disadvantages that exist in every marketing class: the inability to cover all the other important aspects and details of characteristics and strategies that are foregone in order to meet the objective of completing the marketing plan during the semester.

REFERENCES


