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Making Education Relevant. A 'SMART' collaborative project: School Marketing And Real-world Teaching.

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Abstract

Queensland University of Technology and the Department of Education, Training and the Arts developed in 2005, the SMART Project: **S**chool **M**arketing **A**nd **R**eal-world **T**eaching. The project involved over 100 Queensland State Schools and 400 undergraduates working together to produce Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) plans for each school. The success of the project has been demonstrated through survey results showing both undergraduates and principals rated the project as highly beneficial. The project exceeded students' expectations as they saw their role as real and beneficial for gaining real world experience. They were more motivated to learn in a real-world setting.

Introduction

A challenge for universities is to create collaborative learning projects that deliver mutual benefits while providing a supportive learning environment. The need for universities to develop deep and engaging real-world learning experiences for undergraduates is paramount. The issue for universities has been finding real-world clients that have: identified marketing as a key strategic goal; the capacity to utilise a large cohort of undergraduates; understand the learning context of undergraduates; and fit ethically within the boundaries of receiving pro bono services. The purpose of this paper is explore how a real world project benefits students and industry partners.

While education in marketing cannot expect to have students develop every possible skill to prepare them for future employment, experiential marketing projects can be designed to improve and enhance skills in decision making, communication, problem solving, creativity and planning. Benefits have been extensively covered within the literature, with regard students and external stakeholders in an Australian context (Polonsky & Mankelaw 2002).

The development of a collaborate learning project with the Department of Education, Training and the Arts (DETA) met these criteria as DETA's 2010 Queensland State

Education blueprint states that “business skills are needed in the workforce for schools to manage their affairs and marketing” (p.20); “providing expertise for school level marketing” (p. 26); and the Department will help state school principals articulate a vision...working with parents, community and business” (p. 23). One of the key strategies for the DETA’s 2005 – 2009 strategic plan is to manage strategic partnerships that facilitate knowledge sharing and value for money (p23).

There are approximately 1300 state schools throughout Queensland all in need of marketing expertise. State schools have operated within an educational framework, however; in the last decade state schools have had to adopt a marketing perspective. To shift the mindset of principals, DETA identified it was imperative to give principals access to marketing knowledge that showed them the benefits of marketing. The selected state schools working with Queensland University of Technology (QUT) undergraduates has allowed this to happen, as it provided marketing knowledge to principals and at the same time also tapped into their educational knowledge framework to provide a supportive environment for the undergraduates. State schools are worthy of receiving valuable pro bono services, as they are not for profit organisations that represent approximately 70 percent of student enrolments.

The collaborative project

The SMART project collaboration was between Queensland University of Technology’s School of Advertising, Marketing and Public Relations and the Queensland Government’s Department of Education, Training and the Arts, to develop integrated marketing communication plans for selected state primary and high schools throughout Brisbane. Initially, the SMART project involved 50 state schools individually working with a group of four Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) undergraduates during Semester 1, 2005 to fully develop a marketing communications plan.

The aim of the SMART project was to create a real-world teaching and learning environment that provided undergraduates with the opportunity to engage with the theoretical underpinnings of IMC while applying this knowledge in a client setting. It was also necessary to provide undergraduates with a supportive client environment that understood the learning objectives of QUT while at the same time benefiting from the experience.

The marketing communication plan was part of the IMC unit’s assessment and provided a real-world learning environment for students while it also addressed a number of DETA’s strategic objectives. Since the inception of the SMART project in 2005, the project has continued and run with different schools in 2006. To date over 100 schools and 400 undergraduates have been involved in the SMART project.

Since the onset of this pilot program in 2005, QUT has undertaken a number of Department of Education, Training and the Arts (DETA) client-based projects. These projects are an impressive pedagogical tool. Opportunities for students to apply their marketing knowledge to the exact needs of a ‘real’ client offered a productive, hands-on learning experience. The QUT/DETA SMART project has been trialled by the Western Australia’s Department of Education and Training. Initial feedback indicated

the program is providing the same mutual benefits as QUT/DETA's project. The SMART project will expand into other universities and schools throughout Queensland.

The SMART project objective has achieved its goals of delivering 100 integrated marketing communication plans for state schools and providing a real-world learning and teaching environment for QUT undergraduates. Student evaluation of the 2006 project showed the overwhelming majority of students found working with a real-world client a "real and useful" exercise and the undergraduates perceived their role as beneficial for the client.

The Department of Education, Training and the Arts' 2005 evaluation results of school principals showed 80 percent rated the project as good to excellent. This result contributes towards the attainment of specific DETA strategic objectives of "principals marketing their schools" and "manage strategic partnerships that facilitate knowledge sharing and value for money".

The initial project conducted in 2005 focused on delivering an IMC plan for schools. Upon feedback from principals, the 2006 program focused more on an IMC audit with recommendations, as principals wanted a more comprehensive understanding of their communication efforts and the impact this had on their key audiences. The QUT/DETA relationship continues to grow as feedback from both principals and undergraduates has been taken into account when planning for next semester.

To organise and coordinate the SMART project DETA dedicated a marketing officer to ensure the project ran smoothly and that DETA's objective of delivering schools marketing plans was met. The marketing officer liaised with school districts to identify which schools would benefit most. School details were collected and forwarded to the QUT unit coordinator. The marketing officer was a contact point for all schools involved in the project and to liaise with the university on their behalf. Principals were surveyed at the end of the project to gauge their satisfaction and recommendations, with 80 percent of principals rating the project as good to excellent with the majority planning on implementing at least some parts of their marketing plans within the next 12 months.

The main issued surrounding positive collaboration centred on the large number of people involved in the project, with over 400 undergraduates and over 100 school principals all working together to complete individual school marketing plans. This was achieved through open communication systems and regular feedback. Regular meetings between DETA marketing officer and QUT unit coordinator were held. An introductory information seminar for principals was held at QUT to outline the SMART project. Transfer of knowledge was facilitated through DETA's intranet site's *School Media and Marketing Guide*, thereby allowing all principals in Queensland to gain a better understanding of school-based marketing approaches.

Findings

Undergraduates' feedback on their involvement in the SMART project showed they believe they are now better equipped for finding jobs as they have gained real-world

work experience; developed stronger powers of understanding and reasoning; and developed their interpersonal skills. A survey was undertaken drawing on previous works by McLarty (1998) and Thomas and Busby (2003) and the sample was 198 undergraduate students. Females were the majority of the demographic with 69.7 percent, and males were 30.3 percent.

Two major questions were asked, the first question asked whether students had felt if they had developed certain skills and the second explored different experiences gained from the real life project. Sixteen skills were listed in the first survey question including; commitment, confidence, enthusiasm, motivation and reliability. Using a 5 point Likert scale, students needed to rank whether they either strongly agreed or strongly disagreed or was not applicable to what particular skills they had gained from the project. Intelligence (including elements of understanding and reasoning) was found to be more significant for males than females $t(195) = -2.288, p = .023$.

The undergraduates' five highest positive experiences from the project were: added value 91.4 percent; exceeded expectations 90.9 percent; students saw their role as beneficial for client with real world experience 88.9 percent; real and useful 88.3 percent; and tangible benefits shown 83.8 percent. On the other hand, many comments from school principals reflected the value of "looking at the school through a marketing perspective rather than from an educational perspective and fresh ideas from fresh, young and keen eyes". See Table 1.

Table 1 - Principals' Comments on QUT/DETA SMART project

Students provided a well documented marketing plan that identifies who, what, when and how.
It extended my thinking about marketing options/processes that I had not yet considered.
The students were professional and eager to make sure they had a good understanding of the school.
It was great to be able to talk to non-education people – they gave us some different ideas we had not thought of.
A good marketing plan that provided direction in which to travel.
Fresh ideas from innovative people.
Great interest and enthusiasm from students – placed marketing back on the school's agenda.

Source: developed from this research

Conclusions

As there is a gap between the skills required by employees and the skills taught at university (Lattuca & Creamer, 2005). This collaboration has allowed students to accomplish tasks more effectively and efficiently. This collaborative learning project allowed QUT to create a real-world teaching and learning environment on a large scale that enriched student learning by engaging them with clients that are in need of their expertise.

The project was very innovative because it gave both undergraduates and principals the role to become active participants in creating meaningful experiences. By being

active within a group, students (and principals) learn from these interactions. Undertaking a 'real-world' project for a real-life client enhanced their learning journey. The concept and design of this project allowed for: experiential learning (Gremier, Hoffman, Keaveney, & Wright, 2000; Razzouk, Seitz, & Rizkallah, 2003); realism within the classroom (Razzouk et al., 2003); enhanced student motivation (Fox, 2002; Goodell & Kraft, 1991); and fostered learning skills including problem solving, teamwork, communication and critical thinking (Barr & McNeilly, 2002; Kennedy, Lawton, & Walker, 2001). Students and principals gained tangible benefits from real-world experiences, as it added value.

The SMART project allowed principals to develop stronger links with their school community including: increased sponsorship from business, greater understanding of parents needs, and increasing enrolments. Principals have developed effective marketing strategies that target different audiences with key school messages that improve and highlight their school's value and worth to its community.

This collaboration promoted learning as a means of enquiry for students. The project allowed interaction for both parties placing relational dynamics at the centre of the project that not only advanced knowledge for students, but allowed each individual school to advance their knowledge of marketing communication practices.

DETA also gained greater insight into the needs of principals in relation to school-based marketing. This knowledge has been acted upon and included in the Department's Intranet site's *School Media and Marketing Guide* for all principals throughout the state to access.

Traditionally State Schools have had an education perspective with little regard to school based marketing. Over the last decade a stronger marketing approach has been warranted. The SMART project not only has impacted and allowed schools to have an IMC plan undertaken, but also created a learning opportunity for principals that directly impacts on how they perceive their role in managing a school. It placed marketing back on the school's agenda, and it enabled staff to talk to non-education people which gave them some different ideas that they may not have thought of.

The future

This project has been a success on many fronts. Firstly, there has been a positive relationship developed between students and lecturing staff. While the commitment to this learning project started at an individual level, students had to question their own assumptions; they learnt to understand the consequences that their actions and advice would have, and the implications for their client. QUT and DETA have now worked together in other marketing related disciplines including Public Relations and Media Relations units to develop stronger school-based marketing strategies.

Undergraduates are more motivated to learn in a real-world setting. Deep learning occurs when undergraduates operate in real-world contexts, taking theoretical knowledge acquired at university and applying this to satisfy real-world clients' needs. There has been a change in attitude and behaviour when it comes to increased value. Principals were more inclined to include a marketing perspective, as they now

understand its benefits to their school. The SMART project has extended thinking about marketing processes that schools had not considered. The students provided fresh and innovative ideas, allowing a positive attitude to grow between participants. QUT's Public Relations and Media units have used state school in their projects. And within Queensland schools, there is a waiting list of principals wanting to be involved.

Higher education institutions are one of the main driving forces for change within social and cultural opportunities (Forrester-Jones & Hatzidimitriadou, 2006). As well as contributing to the next generation, this project has provided students with lifelong and generic skills.

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