

Using a Marketing Faculty Blog as an Image Differentiator and Learning Resource to Enhance MBA Student Engagement and Loyalty

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Abstract

Universities should strive to emotionally connect with their current students, alumni, and the business community. As learning has morphed into e-learning, higher education marketers must turn to new online approaches to communicate effectively with key stakeholders. A blog can be used to share the latest thinking in marketing, respond to changing customer demands, build brand awareness, and maximize opportunities for user involvement. Using web metrics and strategic insights, the authors demonstrate how a blog can be a powerful digital tool to enhance MBA student involvement and retention.

Keywords: Blogging, teaching innovation, integrated marketing communications (IMC), student engagement, value creation, MBA programs

*“We no longer control the message. We manage the dialogue.”
- Jaime Cohen Szuolc, former CMO/SVP, Levi Strauss & Co.*

1. Introduction

The new realities of marketing are that 21st century organizations must be driven by innovation and value-creating strategies that appeal to stakeholders (Kotler & Keller, 2016). With increasing pressures from competitors and demanding, smart, and sophisticated buyers, organizations must envision a future built around customer needs and desires (Weinstein, 2012). This requires creative enterprises and mindsets, and business cultures, focused on customer-centricity and shared values (Gainer & Padanyi, 2003). Hitt, Keats, & DeMarie (1998) explain we are immersed in a hypercompetitive marketplace – and a market space that is constantly being transformed by technology, online communities, and social media tools and activities.

The educational environment faces demographic shifts, uncertainty, and potential disruption. The institutions of higher learning that embrace change will succeed in challenging markets. In our 24/7 “always-connected” society, carefully conceived University-sponsored blogs can add value to the educational experience and strengthen student/faculty relationships. To date, there has been a paucity of research in this area – hence, the need for this study.

1.1 Using a Blog to Reach Students and Teach Marketing

The H. Wayne Huizenga College of Business and Entrepreneurship (HCBE) at Nova Southeastern University (NSU), Fort Lauderdale, Florida faces intense competition from local AACSB-accredited schools (Florida Atlantic University, Florida International University, University of Miami, and Barry University), distance programs of distinction by the University of Florida, Northwestern University, the Thunderbird School, and dozens of online and for-profit rivals offering MBA degrees in South Florida. This hypercompetitive market space means an abundance of commodity graduate business programs and an urgent emphasis on student retention as consumers pursue their best education options.

The influx of competitors and the need to focus on customer relationships and engagement calls for new ways to build structural bonds and co-create value (Berry, 1995; Weinstein, 2012). HCBE has mounting pressures from various fronts such as enrollment declines, lack of innovative programs, confused positioning/strategic direction, and an AACSB accreditation review.

As one of the few business schools in the world with entrepreneurship in its name, HCBE has a solid reputation for relating to the business community in South Florida. Building on this perceived strength, NSU recently launched the Real-World MBA as part of an overall university-wide rebranding campaign. The MBA Concentration in Marketing which was launched in the Fall of 2012, now has more than 275 students and has

been a huge contributor to the bottom line – in contrast, most other undergraduate and graduate HCBE programs have lost a substantial number of students.

Social media marketing including blogs can be used to develop a strong brand that resonates with customers and enhances an organization's reputation (Solomon, 2014; Kotler & Keller, 2016). Blogs can: 1) engage students, the university community, the business community and other stakeholders (alumni, corporate partners, and media) and, 2) serve as a value-added learning resource. *Real-World Marketing Ideas and Strategies* is the second faculty-driven blog introduced by the HCBE. It follows the *Huizenga School Means Business Success! Blog*, which was recently featured in the *Journal of Strategic Marketing* (Weinstein and McFarlane, 2016).

2. How the Marketing Blog Relates to MBA Curriculum Objectives

The marketing blog innovation relates to HCBE marketing learning outcomes as a part of broader institutional goals and an integrated marketing communications (IMC) strategy. The three overarching objectives are to: 1) maximize opportunities for communicating with, sharing, and interacting with students; 2) build productive and lasting business relationships; and 3) contribute to the understanding of the complex business environment that shapes organizational challenges and affects performance, productivity, and survival for business partners, graduates, and community.

The Huizenga College's goal is to produce "job-ready" marketing managers capable of developing and implementing strategic and tactical plans. The *Real-World Marketing Ideas and Strategies* (2017) blog [<https://secure.business.nova.edu/marketing-blog/>] provides marketing students with hands-on examples and applications to learn how marketing is practiced in today's highly complex and globally competitive economy and market [As a digital platform, the *Real-World Marketing Ideas and Strategies* blog provides important supplemental course resources written primarily by NSU marketing faculty who are renowned scholars, textbook authors, consultants, and corporate executives. Twice monthly blog posts include such timely topics as big data, customer experience marketing, mobile advertising, personal branding, the retail market shake-out, and social media influences. As of December 31, 2016, a rich archival library of 60 posts in 23 categories exists to amplify important marketing topics that are not adequately covered in the textbooks. [Case in point – Kotler & Keller's (2016) *Marketing Management* textbook offers only one paragraph about the concept of blogging, p. 254.]

3. How the HCBE Marketing Blog Creates Value

The focus of this section is marketing information which is the fuel that drives good business decisions. We briefly discuss student and faculty needs as well as the knowledge transfer process.

3.1 Information that Students have about the Blog

Awareness is a key part of consumers' information search in the buying process (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Students in the Huizenga College's MBA in Marketing Program are made aware of the *Real-World Marketing Ideas and Strategies* blog through emails, word-of-mouth, learning activities, inclusion of blog links in syllabi, and online courses. Students learn how to access the free blog, which is placed on the Huizenga College's website, including banner ads, on MBA and Bachelors' marketing program pages, in the Huizenga College's e-newsletter, and on social network sites such as Facebook, Myspace, and LinkedIn.

3.2 Information that Professors want Students to Know about the Blog

Apart from its brand-building focus, the *Real-World Marketing Ideas and Strategies* blog aims to increase students' marketing knowledge by acting as a learning resource that students can use independently, and as a collaborative tool linked to MBA exercises and activities. The marketing faculty of the Huizenga College want students to have access to real-world ideas in marketing (e.g., how to build a business model, conduct a marketing research survey, use marketing dashboards, choose segmentation criteria, etc.). This goal is in response to the needs of corporate recruiters who are seeking managers highly skilled in planning, directing, and coordinating marketing programs.

3.3. Information Delivery Process

The *Real-World Marketing Ideas and Strategies* blog is content management software and a site that makes it easy for faculty and students to publish and access short articles called posts (Saravanakumar & SuganthaLakshmi, 2012). It offers basic features such as comments, blog rolls, trackbacks, subscriptions, and usage metrics. The marketing blog developed by the Huizenga College encourages knowledge transfer and dialogue -- important blog functions identified by Ojala (2005). Students may access the blog in several ways including accessing links containing marketing posts published under various marketing themes and selecting specific topics by categories, authors, or date.

3.4. Information Materials

To engage students, marketing faculty provide students with 300-1,200 word marketing posts, charts, infographics, links, and/or supplemental materials to augment discussion and foster collaborative discussion. Students submit blog-based assignments, which are graded, to facilitate comprehension of the material, improve analytical reasoning and applications, and develop a real-world marketing perspective (an example of a blog post is provided in Figure 1).

4. Connecting with Stakeholders via the Marketing Blog

Successful marketing communications can promote favorable experiences, create highly loyal relationships, and affect brand equity (Keller, 2009). He adds, “integrating marketing communications involves mixing and matching different communication options to establish the desired awareness and image in the minds of consumers” (p. 139). As such, the MBA in Marketing represents part of the Huizenga College’s core business strategy, and the *Real-World Marketing Ideas and Strategies* is an extension of the IMC program designed to maximize stakeholder contacts. Blogs offer an excellent way for companies to stay in touch with customers and to obtain feedback while building relationships (Weinstein & McFarlane, 2016; Safko, 2012).

Competition within the business educational market is intense and having an MBA in Marketing with an interactive and valuable forum promoting real-world strategies and ideas creates “something special”, especially in an age where customer empowerment and co-creation of value matters and where social media marketing resonates with graduate students. This is particularly important for millennials -- the MBA target market -- who are technology- oriented, social media-dependent, and often prefer accessing information in shorter forms (i.e., knowledge chunks) rather than reading supplemental books or journal articles.

Figure 1. A Marketing Blog Post and Assignment
Image Positioning - Differentiate to Communicate Value

By [Dr. Art Weinstein](#) in [Marketing Communications](#) | [21 Comments](#)  



American society is intrigued by image. Consider this related word - imagine. Disney is all about the customer experience and emotionally and magically transports guests to another time or place. Image is often associated with entertainment, fashion, and technology markets. Corporate image is the reputation of an organization viewed by its various stakeholders – investors, employees, customers, business partners, communities, etc. All companies have a singular corporate personality that differentiates them from their rivals. The communication challenge is to manage and enhance the firm’s identity over time.

A perceived image is based on two components: 1) what the company does and says, and 2) what the customers/market say about the organization - this is more important. Companies must manage a strong IMC (integrated marketing communications) program consisting of advertising, selling, sales promotion, online, social media, and public relations activities. Customer-generated content such as Facebook posts, tweets, blogs, and online communities can dramatically impact organizational performance.

Perhaps your company is not a global giant – does image research make sense for you? Consider these queries as you revisit your marketing communications strategy. How important is image in your value proposition? Should it be even more important? Does your image clearly resonate with your target market? How can you get your customers and the market to share more positive messages about your company? What is your main point of differentiation from your competitors? Should coolness be a major or minor part of your IMC strategy? How can you best tell your business story to communicate value?

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The *Real-World Marketing Ideas and Strategies* blog is an effective tool which establishes forums of information, provides news on programs and services, offers practical business advice, answers key marketing questions, and demonstrates the technical, conceptual, and social skills of the marketing faculty (Castronovo & Huang, 2012). The need to build a strong brand and create a brand personality reflecting customer desires is met by the *Real-World Marketing Ideas and Strategies* blog; and, an increased brand reputation helps attract and retain customers (Scott, 2003).

The blog has generated substantial web traffic and strengthened the HCBE's relationship with MBA marketing students and other stakeholders. To date, the marketing blog has received more than 68,700 views and 1,500 plus comments from subscribers and readers. In fact, the HCBE marketing blog has played a valuable role in the success and growth of its MBA Marketing program. Such an academic achievement makes it a pedagogical innovation according to Niederhoffer, Mooth, Wiesenfeld, & Gordon (2007).

Blogs are effective social marketing tools that build brands, engage customers, and foster long-term relationships (Wright, 2006; Thackeray, Neiger, & Hanson, 2007). Today's customers value being connected, and the internet plays a major role in that connection. A blog is an important part of using the internet to connect with customers to maintain relevance, build brand awareness, and foster relationships.

As Rowley (2001) notes, "the internet demands a significant review of approaches to marketing communications at both the strategic and tactical levels" (p. 203). The *Real-World Marketing Ideas and Strategies* blog operates at both levels: at the strategic level, it represents part of the Huizenga College's IMC strategy, and at the tactical level, it provides value-added services and relationship-building opportunities for MBA marketing students (Barton, Koslow, & Beauchamp, 2014). These dual benefits yield a competitive edge over many other MBA programs.

5. The Impact of the Marketing Blog

Ten of the sixty (16.7%) blog posts accounted for 36.5% of total views. Each of these most popular marketing topics generated more than 1,900 views. Collectively, the top ten posts were viewed more than 25,000 times (see Table 1). The leading topics averaged 24.1 comments which was slightly lower but not statistically different ($p > .05$) than the overall average of all blog post comments (mean = 25.6).

Posts were written in 23 marketing categories. Ten topics generated three or more posts. Student marketing issues led the way with 7 posts, followed by branding (6), sales (5), and advertising (4). Six other topics each accounted for three posts (see Table 2).

The top ten posts featured nine unique categories. Marketing communications issues (the only top ten category with two posts) were the first and third most popular topics contributing 6,900 unique views (see Table 1). Overall, this category generated twice the expected level of viewership. Other above average categories were social media and international marketing with view indices of 142 and 125 respectively.

As Table 2 shows, student marketing issues and consumer behavior were the pacesetters in generating comments (indexes = 150) followed by social media (index = 138). Under-performing topics included advertising, marketing research, and sales. (Underperforming was defined as topics that had both view indexes and comments indexes of less than 90, where 100 = average).

Fourteen full-time and part-time marketing faculty and seven graduate marketing students participated in this project. The two leading writers (SWS and AW) contributed 15 topics, including the top four posts and six of the top nine items, which were viewed 26,589 times and generated 411 comments. Hence, less than 10% of the writers accounted for 39% of the blog traffic and 27% of the readers' comments.

Table 1. Top 10 Blog Posts by Views *

Post	Category	Views	Comments	Writer
1. Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM)	Marketing Communications	4,200	28	SWS
2. Are Multi-channel Consumers Around the World Similar?	Consumer Behavior	3,118	60	SWS
3. Image Positioning	Marketing Communications	2,700	21	AW
4. Co-creation of Value	Customer Value	2,696	13	AW
5. Healthy Employees, Happy Customers	Internal Marketing	2,211	8	MP
6. Process Innovation and Customer Value	Innovation	2,139	15	AW
7. Inbound Marketing	Social Media	2,134	24	JB
8. Multi or Single- item Measures?	Marketing Research	2,018	45	BJ
9. Hispanic Business Owners	Entrepreneurial Marketing	1,970	18	SWS
10. What's in a Name?	Branding	1,932	9	RA

* as of December 31, 2016

Table 2. Blog Posts by Category, Number of Posts, Average Views, and Average Comments *

Category	Number of Posts	Average # of Views/ Index (100 = base)	Average # of Comments/ Index (100 = base)
Student Marketing Issues	7	417/ 36	39/ 150
Branding	6	1,070/ 93	23/ 88
Sales	5	925/ 91	14/ 54
Advertising	4	670/ 59	16/ 62
Consumer Behavior	3	1,929/ 68	39/ 150
Entrepreneurial Marketing	3	1,063 / 93	14 / 54
International Marketing	3	1,435/ 125	17 / 65
Marketing Communications	3	2,333/ 204	19 / 73
Marketing Research	3	944 / 82	21/ 81
Social Media	3	1,624/ 142	36/ 138
Posts **	60	1,145 / 100	26/ 100

*as of December 21, 2016

** includes 20 other posts on various marketing topics in 13 categories

6. Managing a Marketing Blog – Challenges and Solutions

6.1 Creating Content and Faculty Support

A year-round problem is creating sufficient content to offer two or more high quality posts monthly. As professors face the usual academic pressures of teaching, research, and service, writing marketing blogs is not a top priority for most. In addition, an AACSB initial self-evaluation study has added to the workload for all marketing faculty. In response, a recent innovation has been the addition of MBA students as guest bloggers.

Under the supervision of a professor, students were asked to write a blog post as an assignment in their marketing communications course. The nine best topics were forwarded to the blog advisor and blog manager for further review. Subsequently, eight of those student posts were chosen to be run in the blog, mostly in the Summer, which is a slow season due to limited classes. These millennials write high quality material and relate well to the readers since many are peers. Furthermore, these MBA students are digital marketing savvy and share their work with their friends and colleagues on social networks such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter which helps promote the blog. The student work was outstanding. While the viewership was lower than for a typical faculty post, the engagement level based on number of comments was considerably higher. Based on this encouraging pilot test, the plan is to continue to get the best students actively involved in writing blog posts. This skill set will also be helpful to them as many employers now ask new hires to take on similar tasks as part of managing social media marketing initiatives.

Although *Real-World Marketing Ideas and Strategies* is a strong business school differentiator and great vehicle to share knowledge, communicate, and dialogue with stakeholders, marketing professors have different levels of enthusiasm for this initiative. The marketing blog team has met in small groups and individually with faculty to explain how to use this resource as a learning tool, particularly as a weekly assignment in online courses (see Figure 1). This is significant since 62% of MBA Marketing students take their coursework via the online format.

Having top-level support of this initiative helps gain faculty buy-in for the project, particularly among newer and younger faculty. Dr. J. Preston Jones, Dean – NSU Huizenga College of Business and Entrepreneurship stated,

“As the late Peter Drucker noted, business is all about marketing and innovation. Our marketing blog is another value-added offering for our M.B.A. and B.S. Marketing students, as well as our valued business partners. I personally read and benefit from this blog and believe our stakeholders will, too!”

6.2 Adapting the Blog Across the Marketing Curriculum

Currently, the usage of blog material in the MBA Marketing program varies widely by course and instructor preference. The two required courses are Marketing Decisions for Managers and Cases in Strategic Marketing (capstone). Students choose five other courses from the following nine options – Consumer Behavior, Customer Value, Global Marketing, Managing Marketing Communications, Marketing Research, Product and Brand Management, Sales Management, Services Marketing, and Social Media Marketing. The Customer Value course has used blog material extensively while the Global Marketing, Marketing Research, and Services Marketing courses have used some blog examples in the coursework.

According to Ahuja and Medury (2010), business blog content may be organizational, promotional,

general, and relational. Relational content maximizes reader engagement (measured in terms of consumer comments) and relates to topics that solicit feedback, controversies, media reports, consumer issues, and topics that generate emotions. A majority of the posts to the *Real World Marketing Ideas and Strategies* blog are characterized as relational content.

In the first iteration of the blog, our objective has been to provide useful marketing information to students, alumni, and the marketing community. The short pieces have been designed to blend relevant academic marketing concepts with best business practices. Writers have been asked to keep their topics fresh, interesting, research-based, cutting-edge, and useful for staying ahead of today's marketing challenges and opportunities. As we transition to the blog 2.0, new objectives will include tying topics closer to the curriculum and branching out beyond relational content.

7. Concluding Remarks

Future research directions include technological enhancements (e.g., video blogs), ways to utilize marketing practitioners as guest bloggers, deeper analyses of blog metrics based on the content marketing funnel, and how blogs can tie into overall university integrated marketing communications plans.

We believe that higher educational institutions need to operationalize and implement the principles and practices that they teach students in the classroom. This case study on developing and managing a marketing blog offers a compelling application of how this ambitious goal can be achieved – both as an image building strategy and a teaching tool. Universities and business schools must differentiate to succeed in a rapidly changing and mature education and knowledge market. A carefully conceived and well executed marketing blog can be an excellent tool to stay ahead of the pack.

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