

20 Electronic Tools to Redesign a Marketing Course

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This chapter presents reasons from the business community why communications skills are vital, historical information about the WAC movement, and suggestions for ways instructors can combine writing projects with newer technologies, such as e-mail and the Internet. The end result is a revamped marketing course that satisfies basic core content competencies while also incorporating electronic writing assignments that produce advanced thinking and communication skills employers seek of college graduates.

Introduction

The importance of good communications skills for success in business—and in marketing in particular—is recognized as an important asset for anyone who hopes to succeed in a business career (e.g., Collins 1982; DiSalvo 1980; Latimer 1982; Meister and Reinsch 1978; Myers 1991; Wolvin 1984). Indeed, Brownell (1987) suggests that effective communication is essential to effective management. However, the lack of good communications skills by entry-level college graduates and employees is frequently mentioned by businesspeople and educators as a serious problem in business (e.g., Aby, Barr, and Sterrett 1991; Chonko and Caballero 1991; Hahn and Mohrman 1985). Part of this increasing awareness, according to Dingle (1989), is the decline in the quality of writing in schools and the workplace as perceived by educators and the media. Another reason is pure economics: unclear writing in the business profession is expensive. Unclear writing costs American businesses in excess of an estimated one billion dollars annually (Dingle 1989). Furthermore, Waxler (1987) argues that “writing is central to the creation of meaning in the business world” (42).

Poor writing is not the only complaint business leaders levy at business school graduates. Other complaints include the following:

- business graduates do not perform adequately in the areas of oral and written communication;

- business school curricula are too “tools-oriented” as the expense of qualitative thinking;
- business school graduates cannot tolerate ambiguity and bring order out of seeming confusion;
- business school graduates do not know how to recognize common themes in business situations;
- business school graduates have not learned how to see the relationships among things that seem very different;
- business school graduates are not capable of the type of thinking that comes from the many ways to look at the world. (Chonko and Caballero 1991)

Further, in a study of chief executive officers (CEOs) of 200 of the largest U.S. corporations and deans from 200 business schools, two of the five key learning areas considered to be most important for graduating business students included oral and written communication skills and the ability to think, to analyze, and to make decisions (Harper 1987).

The need for business school graduates—for marketing graduates—to have strong written and oral communications skills as well as the ability to analyze and synthesize is increasingly apparent. In fact, Chonko (1993) suggests that developing critical-thinking and strong communications skills should be two objectives for business school education. How can this be accomplished? Business schools can instill a communication-across-the-curriculum (CAC) mentality, particularly in marketing departments.

Writing Across the Curriculum

A great deal has been written about the broad and growing influence the WAC movement has had in American higher education over the past twenty years (see, for example, Russell 1991). The WAC literature suggests that writing plays a powerful role in the production, as well as presentation, of knowledge, and that writing is a tool that enables people in every discipline to wrestle with facts and ideas (Zinsser 1988).

Wolfe and Pope (1985) propose that writing is an important way of realizing, clarifying, defining, reflecting, imagining, inventing, inquiring, organizing, interpreting, discovering, decision-making, problem-solving, and evaluating—in short, an important part of thinking and learning. Knoblauch and Brannon (1983) reinforce the use of writing in all courses when they state,

Presumably what every classroom seeks to nurture is intellectual conversation, leading to enhanced powers of discernment. Since writing enables both learning and conversation, manifesting and enlarging the capacity to discover connections, it should be a resource that all teachers in all disciplines can rely on to achieve their purposes. (473)

Electronic Delivery of Information

For many companies, electronic delivery of information has become the prominent communications system (Hawkins 1990)—mainly because it addresses a real problem facing large organizations: how to operate in multiple locations and still achieve timely and cost-effective interpersonal communication (Crawford 1982). These organizations have discovered that e-mail offers five essential advantages over traditional communication modes: (1) an overall cost reduction; (2) reduced paper handling; (3) faster communications; (4) improved communication effectiveness; and (5) integration of data communication with records management (D'Souza 1991).

Furthermore, educators describe electronic communications as a combination of skills: verbal and written functions, critical thinking, and computer and telecommunications (Hansen 1994). Including electronic communications in content area courses such as marketing actually can make teaching more effective.

Redesigning an Introductory Marketing Course

The typical introductory marketing course focuses on introducing students to the marketing discipline and marketing terminology. To facilitate these objectives (and often large class sizes), most of these marketing courses require objective tests and quizzes. Some instructors will incorporate a term paper or project (usually due at the end of the term) or case studies.

The redesigned marketing course is based on writing assignments that embody the following assumptions: (1) writing is a critical process of thinking and learning; (2) students become empowered by building thinking and analytical skills through writing; (3) not all student writing must be read and evaluated by the instructor; (4) students may and should help each other in writing assignments through the use of peer reviews; and (5) some student writing is for the writer alone, whereas other writing is intended for sharing (Coker and Scarborough 1990).

The redesigned marketing course is also based on the following assumptions about electronic communication: (1) it offers students speed in communicating ideas; (2) it provides a forum for feedback of ideas and interests; (3) it provides a “safe” place for shy students to express their opinions and ideas; and (4) it offers students the opportunity to experience and partake in communication with people different from themselves.

The redesigned marketing course includes a number of different writing projects that occur electronically, including participation in a “local” marketing discussion group, an Internet electronic discussion group (listserv), and case

write-ups and reaction papers, as well as others described below. Specific guidelines for the Marketing Discussion Group can also be found below. The revamped marketing course takes a great deal more preparation on the part of the instructor, but the results make it well worth the effort.

Possible Electronic Communications Assignments

- Local Marketing Discussion Group. Moderated by the professor and teaching assistant. Purpose is to stimulate discussion and learning of marketing-related issues.
 - minimum of one entry per week
 - maximum of five entries per week
- Case Write-ups/Reactions. Groups of students (sometimes working with students from other universities via the Internet) analyze and write a case analysis. The case can then be forwarded to another group of students for reaction analysis.
 - utilize local e-mail or Internet for group discussions
 - case analysis and reaction can both be used in marketing discussion group
 - use of Internet is encouraged for case research
- Country Project. Individual project that involves student becoming an expert on a particular country, then developing a product/service to market in that country.
 - utilize Internet/Web for country background and research
 - utilize marketing discussion group (or e-mail to professor) to test ideas
 - abstract and outline e-mailed and peer-reviewed via e-mail
- Internet Discussion Groups. Students are required to join three Internet discussion groups, with at least one being marketing-related. Many join Market-L, the oldest and most respected of marketing-related electronic discussion lists.
- Electronic Journal. Weekly journal entries are sent to professor's e-mail account. Some assignments are assigned (formal), but most are writer's option (informal).
- Study Guides. Students work in groups electronically preparing chapter study guides. Group then electronically submits one version to professor's account.
- Chapter Reviews. Similar to study guides, class members work in electronic groups developing chapter reviews, with one version sent to professor's account.

- **Market Research.** Students are responsible for finding information on the World Wide Web (using browser software such as Netscape or Microsoft Explorer) on a particular subject. Students have found the best search engines to be Infoseek, Lycos, and Magellan. More information can be found in the forthcoming book by Hansen and Hansen, *Write Your Way to a High GPA*.
- **Web Homepage.** Students design and create their own Web homepages, with a clear understanding of the marketing/advertising value of the Web. Students design their pages through HTML coding or specialized software, such as HTML Assistant Pro Lite.

The Marketing Discussion Group

Point Value: 100

Rationale: To summarize, to argue, to take issue with, to respond, to relate, to contemplate, and to question issues dealing with marketing and you.

Requirements: Starting as soon as you get an e-mail account, you will be placed into a local (Stetson) marketing discussion group. The dialogue in this group will be moderated by the professor, but the goal is unlimited marketing discussion.

Several specific topics will be discussed, but beyond those assigned by the instructor, you are on your own to discuss anything at all.

Many of the specific topics raised in the discussion group will pertain to the class. These topics will be assigned weekly, but include such possibilities as:

1. Reactions to chapter readings;
2. Discussions of trends/current events in marketing;
3. Responses to ethical issues/discussions;
4. Brainstorming ideas for term paper;
5. Developing marketing vocabulary;
6. Creating press releases and advertisements;
7. Writing memos and letters;
8. Preparing individual work for group projects;
9. Gender issues in marketing.

You must be prepared to log on to the discussion group at least once a day so that you can monitor current debate/discussion.

Grading: Grading will be done according to the extent to which you actively participate in the discussion group.

Evaluation of Electronic Communications

After using e-mail in a principles of marketing class for several semesters, students' overall evaluation is positive. To a high degree, students accept using electronic communications; students tend to be more enthusiastic about the course; students have a clearer understanding of different forms of writing; stu-

dents often complete assignments before deadlines when a project is being submitted electronically; and initial comparisons with prior classes where electronic communications were not used show that grades are generally higher in the redesigned classes. On the negative side, there is still some degree of computer phobia among students not familiar with computer or electronic communications; there is the problem of access and availability of computers; there is the potential of technical support problems, depending upon the quality of the school's computer services department; and there is a new set of technical excuses relating to why assignments are not completed by due dates.

Results from student evaluations specifically about the use of electronic communications in a marketing class can be found in the Appendix.

Conclusions

While the results are preliminary, they speak for themselves. Incorporating electronic writing into a WAC-redesigned marketing course achieves all goals and expectations. The use of writing—electronic writing—improves analytical and critical-thinking skills, betters problem-solving abilities, and strengthens communications and technical abilities. These results are shown through the quality of discussion, higher grades, and a deepened interest and understanding of the subject.

There are, however, some downsides for teachers who use this type of CAC approach. First, there is a greater amount of time spent before the class begins preparing for many of the electronic assignments. Second, more technological knowledge is needed by the teacher—and by the students—and often spills over into classroom discussion. Third, no matter how good the system, there will be technology-related snafus. Fourth, there are new technology-related excuses from students, such as power surges destroying files on floppy disks. Finally, the teacher is much more dependent on an outside group—the school's information technology/academic computing department.

Still, educators have an obligation to both students and employers to develop essential skills, including communications and technological skills. The rewards for students are a better understanding of course content and a higher value in the job marketplace. The rewards for faculty using the communication-across-the-curriculum techniques described in this chapter are intrinsic: more successful and more satisfying teaching.

Note

More specific information about what the final redesigned courses look like can be found on Randall Hansen's Web site: <http://www.stetson.edu/~hansen/courses.html>.

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Appendix: Electronic Communications Evaluations

I. Quantitative Results

(Seven-point scale, where 7=strongly agree, 4=neutral, and 1=strongly disagree)

<i>Evaluative Statement</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Dev.</i>
1. I found the overall process helped me learn more material about the class.	5.48	1.37
2. I found the process a convenient and efficient method to do assignments.	5.95	1.09
3. I would prefer to do assignments on e-mail rather than more traditional ways.	5.14	1.42
4. I would have preferred more tests than the e-mail case analyses.	2.38	1.84
5. I believe participating and using e-mail will be beneficial to me as an employment skill.	6.19	0.91
6. Overall, I found the e-mail exercises to be useful.	5.81	1.05

II. Qualitative Results

(*Verbatim*)

1. The biggest benefit of using e-mail in this class was:
 - Instant communication with instructor and other class members.
 - The easy availability and quick transfer of information which it allowed for.
 - Expressing ideas and mailing (communicating) faster.
 - I like the convenience. E-mail is an effective way to do the assignment.
 - The information that was available on a daily basis. I felt it was a good way to keep on top of things.
 - Not having to print out papers—just push a button and it was sent to the instructor.
 - The biggest benefit of using e-mail in this class was the convenience it provided for both the student and the professor.
 - Communication of the whole class, yet no nervousness about it. The e-mail system allows everyone to view their opinions about the cases and class.
2. The biggest problem of using e-mail in this class was:
 - The fact that it does not work in the same manner as a normal word processing program.
 - Trying to work around the computer lab hours, especially on weekends.
 - The fact that you cannot save it, go back to it, or edit the line above.
 - If you don't check your mail often, you lose out on things, fall behind.