

AN EXPLORATORY ANALYSIS OF INCORPORATING CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE FRAMEWORKS WITHIN AN EMBA PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to determine how to effectively incorporate customer experience management frameworks within the marketing and management of Executive MBA Programs. To determine this information, two customer experience management frameworks were discussed in detail and then an analysis ensued on its potential applicability of enhancing the EMBA student experience. The main findings of this study indicate that as a result of this “experience economy”, incorporating a targeted, consistent and branded customer experience within any product or service, with EMBA Programs being no exception, is of critical importance. The results of this exploratory study can have significant implications on the future management and marketing of Executive MBA Programs.

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INTRODUCTION

The primary thesis of this research is to illustrate the importance of Customer Experience Management (CEM) and why CEM principles must be rigorously applied to the marketing and management of Executive MBA Programs. The ultimate goal of this research is to illustrate how such principles, if implemented effectively, can create “program enthusiasts” and “product evangelists” among the student body. The concept of “Customer Experience” is a relatively new phenomenon. It first emerged within the literature within Pine and Gilmore’s *The Experience Economy*, published in 1999. Since that time, other research emerged indicating that the overall customer experience is extremely important and that consumers are willing to pay a premium for a unique and desired experience. Various brands have successfully incorporated this concept of “experience” within the consumption process of products and services, thus differentiating themselves within the market.

Yet these new Customer Experience Frameworks that have been developed have not been seriously applied to the management, marketing and execution for programs within higher education. There have been a variety of reasons why this has not occurred which will be illustrated within this paper. Therefore, with this as a background, and as a Dean for a recently Ranked Executive MBA Program within the United States, the goal of this research is to illustrate how CEM Frameworks could potentially be interwoven within the management, marketing and execution of the Executive MBA Product. The ultimate goal of this strategy is to create a market buzz for such a product. In order to conduct such an investigation, this paper will first, within its literature review section, analyze the emergence of the experience economy as well as companies that are utilizing the concept of experience to their advantage. The literature review section will also analyze whether Executive MBA students should in fact be considered customers. The research will then present two specific CEM Frameworks in detail and examples will be given on their potential applicability within the management, marketing and execution of the Executive MBA product. Conclusions will be presented as to its potential viability as a strategy within the administration of an Executive MBA Program.

LITERATURE REVIEW

his next section will highlight the following three themes as seen in the literature. First, it will illustrate the “Experience Economy” that now encompasses the lives of all consumers. It will also discuss organizations and “brands” that are utilizing “experience” as a differentiating factor. Lastly it will analyze the premise of whether executive students should be considered customers. Such an analysis is imperative in order to apply such CEM Frameworks to a program.

The Emergence of Experience

The traditional marketing concept of determining the needs and wants of target markets and delivering on these needs and wants with products and services is the foundation to any company’s marketing program. (Kotler, 2003, p.29). The traditional marketing paradigm also includes the importance of communicating the product’s features, benefits and value to prospective and current customers. In addition, the traditional marketing concept assumes that consumers are rational and make purchasing decisions based on an overall utility analysis. (Schmitt, 1999, p 13). Yet things have changed since the industrial revolution when the traditional marketing concept was established. The information economy, as it is now coined, has given prospective consumers the ability to research the features and benefits of any product in question thus making them more informed than ever before. It is almost as if the features and benefits of a product are now expected and consumers desire much more such as “breakthrough solutions, cutting-edge products and brands they can connect with and be stimulated by.” (Schmitt, 1999, p. 21).

Secondly, the concept of experiential marketing, as opposed to marketing solely a product’s features and benefits, has also emerged as a communication strategy within this “Age of Experience”. This strategy has ignited and increased the amount of emotional and impulse driven purchases centered on a desired experience. (Schmitt, 1999 p. 22). In addition, the experience concept has also redefined branding to more than just logos, slogans, awareness and image. Branding is now become an experiential concept. (Schmitt, 1999, p. 31). The brand, in essence, is now more about creating and delivering a specific targeted experience associated around a product and/or service.

Evolution of the Experience Economy—the Birthday Party Phenomenon

All of the above has led to the “Experience Economy”. A great example that illustrates this phenomenon can be seen with the evolution of birthday parties. More specifically, approximately fifty years ago, the celebration of a birthday entailed the mother of the “birthday child” purchasing ingredients such as butter, sugar and milk for the purposes of making a birthday cake from scratch. These ingredients became “the commodity” within the cycle and led to the main celebration of eating the cake. (Pine II and Gilmore, 1999, pp. 20-21).

Phase II of this process occurred during the 1960s and 1970s when parents started to purchase a “Betty Crocker” or “Duncan Hines” mix to make the cake. In addition, parents began organizing parties which included games and fun in the backyard. The “commodity” of butter, sugar, and milk became transformed to that of a “purchased good” which is now the cake mix (Pine II and Gilmore, 1999, pp. 21). Within Phase III of this process, parents stopped making cakes at home altogether and started purchasing them from either the supermarket or local bakery. This moved the process away from “the good” of the cake mix to that of a purchased cake which is now “the service”. While the costs of purchasing a cake exceeds that of making one from a mix, parents viewed this service as essential in order to plan other elements of the backyard party. (Pine II and Gilmore, 1999, p. 21).

Stage IV of this evolution or the final stage, began in the new millennium when parents started, with frequency, outsourcing these birthday parties to places such as *Chuck E. Cheese’s*, *Discovery Zone*, and

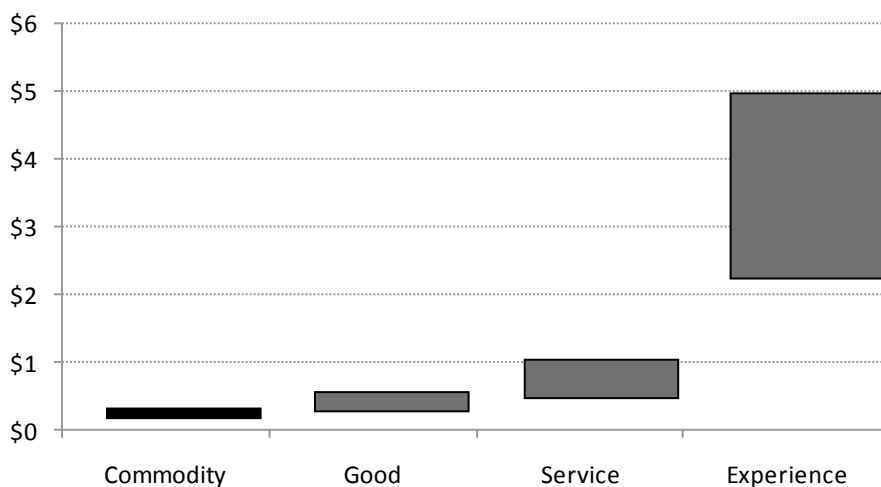
Club Disney. These parties have become very expensive and can cost the parents several hundred of dollars. However, parents are willing to make this expenditure as they are paying for the “desired experience” that this outside venues offer. (Pine II and Gilmore, 1999, p. 21). This example illustrates that the “Experience Economy is everywhere. The “commodity” of butter, eggs and milk to make the cake is very inexpensive. “The good” of a cake mix raises the overall cost slightly. “The service” of purchasing a cake increases the cost slightly as well. However, the largest increase in costs for the party over this evolution is the outsourcing of the party in the final stage.

Companies Offering Experiential Differential

The “Experience Economy” has also led to the development of many interesting and successful companies. One example of such a company is Starbucks which opened in 1971 in Seattle from an initial \$10,000 investment from its original owners of Gerald Baldwin, Gordon Bowker and Zev Siegl. (Smith & Wheeler, 2002, pp. 4-5). Howard Schultz, in 1987, then purchased Starbucks and expanded its operations to Chicago and a host of other cities. For an eleven year period from 1987-1998, Starbucks, as a strategy, spent less than \$10 million on advertising. Their goal was that providing a unique, consistent and branded experience can be more effective then spending hundreds of millions on advertising (Smith & Wheeler, pp. 4-5).

It is interesting to note that even though the Starbucks hot drink can be purchased for \$2.50 and above, the actual cost to produce it is approximately eighteen cents (Smith & Wheeler, 2002, p. 6). Yet, what Starbuck’s enthusiasts are paying for is not necessarily the taste of the hot drink but rather the total immersionary experience of that “third space” between home and the office. (Schmitt, 2003 CEM p. 7). This phenomenon of the “Experience Economy” and “Starbucks” can be seen in Figure 1 which is also, in principle, similar to the birthday party phenomenon.

Figure 1: Price of Coffee Offerings



This figure e illustrates the four stages “a good” travels in order to become an “experiential product”. More specifically, it also illustrates how consumers are willing to pay a premium for a unique and branded customer experience. In the case of Starbucks, ‘the commodity’ are the coffee beans, ‘the good’ is the coffee can in the supermarket, ‘the service’ is the cup of coffee at the delicatessen and “the experience” is purchasing the coffee at Starbucks. (Source: Pine II and Gilmore, The Experience Economy, 1999, p. 2)

Avis is another company that falls within this category. This car rental firm has the “We Try Harder” slogan and has set itself apart from its competitors because of the total experience it offers to its customers. Mr. Robert. F. Salerno, Avis President and COO in 2002, further illustrated this point:

Avis has dedicated tremendous amounts of resources over the last several years to develop a process for managing the customer experience and to provide our employees with the tools for supporting our strategies of winning customer loyalty and service excellence. Customers are telling us that there is something special about Avis and the value we deliver that the others cannot match. (Smith & Wheeler, 2002, p. 33)

The result of this strategy is significant as Avis achieved the highest level of customer loyalty among its peers according to a survey conducted by Brand Keys (Brand Keys 2001 Customer Loyalty Leader's Index). In addition, Avis received the highest points for customer loyalty among 129 companies surveyed across 24 industry categories and further scored top billing on customer service compared to its competitors. (Brand Keys 2001 Customer Loyalty Index). Harley Davidson is another company that has differentiated itself with its customer experience. Overall, Harley brands itself as a "total ownership experience" and has created the Harley Owners Group (H.O.G.S.) with over 100,000 active Harley members. (Smith & Wheeler, 2002, p. 34). This organization within Harley sponsors group rides and members actively participate on the Harley web site. This feeling of ownership has created a customer base with a deep and personal relationship with the Harley Brand. Such a relationship has many of its riders tattooing the Harley Logo on their bodies which is a true testament to the Brand Experience. (Smith & Wheeler, 2002, p. 34).

These brands illustrate how important the customer experience process is with creating a loyal customer base. However, at this point, before continuing this discussion, it is critical to explore the next question about executive students and whether they should in fact be considered customers. It is important to analyze this question if one would like to incorporate the CEM Frameworks within the management and execution of Executive MBA programs.

ARE EXECUTIVE STUDENTS CUSTOMERS?

Should Executive MBA students be considered customers? There has been much research done on this type of question when higher education, in the early 1990s, began to question whether to implement the Total Quality Management Frameworks within the management of such institutions. As a background, the TQM movement is an extension of W. Edwards Deming's management philosophy that was implemented so successfully in manufacturing and service type settings. (Dobyns & Crawford-Mason, 1994). Upon witnessing this management philosophy's success in other sectors and also compounded by market pressures within academia, educational personnel in higher education saw an urgent need to consider the implementation of TQM within their own institutions. (Schwartzman, 1995)

The research that emerged throughout this period focused on how institutions of higher education should treat students and whether they should be considered actual customers like consumers are considered in other industries. Two subsequent positions emerged. The first position states that since students are paying tuition then they are in fact customers. The tuition is for a service and establishes a contract between the university and student. The items can range from participation in classes, coursework, access to faculty to other services such as billing, registration and financial aid. The main point that supports this argument is as follows: if tuition revenue is the predominant revenue generator for the college or university, then institutions have no choice but to treat the students as its customers. (Schwartzman, 1995).

The support behind this argument is relatively straightforward. First, it potentially allows the institution to be more accountable. (Schwartzman, 1995). Universities have become very departmentalized, over its evolution, with its own objectives and agendas. This is especially prevalent within faculty led departments and areas. Therefore, this type of structure can potentially lead units to be "oblivious to students" and even "contemptuous of them". (Schwartzman, 1995). As a result, treating students as

customers and responding to their academic questions, inquiries and needs can allow institutions of higher education to improve cooperation among all stakeholders and recognize the students as official participants in the educational process rather than passive recipients. (Schwartzman, 1995). In addition, this argument creates a situation where university personnel have an obligation to serve their students which is critical. (Marchese, 1993).

More specifically, this argument can be applied to the student service arena of a university which includes registration, billing, food services, and maintenance. Improving these services, which are considered “business like transactions”, can easily be benchmarked and can subsequently improve the entire experience for students. (Beaver, 1994). The second position that resulted from this research is that students should not be considered customers for the following two points. The first point, which is more elusive, is that universities have difficulty defining their customers given the many benefactors. The second point indicates that institutions will compromise short term satisfaction with long term learning if they do in fact consider students as customers. (Schwartzman, 1995).

In terms of this first point, the customer of a university can be considered quite scattered as “colleges and universities have no clear understanding of who the customers, either internal or external, are”. (Winter, 1991, p. 59). Is the student receiving the education the sole customer? Or are customers the local, national and international communities since they are all benefactors, to some extent, of this education? (Rinehart, 1993, p. 57). Since the recipients of these benefits are so intertwined within society, this argument indicates it is very difficult to determine the actual customer.

The second point of compromising short term satisfaction with long term learning brings up the important point of “is the customer always right?” For example, how are curriculum issues set forth by the Faculty of a University upheld if there exists a conflict with the students if an institution considers the student as a customer? This could, in fact, be an issue within this argument. Therefore, this argument supports the premise that students retreat to a university degree program to not only learn new concepts but to also develop an entirely new thought process. During this period of academic and intellectual renewal and discovery, students cannot be considered customers as their judgments may not be useful and “they have no conception on what they must learn.” (Rinehart, 1993, p. 59). This argument subsequently dictates that students, during the learning process, lack the needed expertise to determine the content and quality that must be taught. (Beaver, 1994).

In addition, within this argument, another point that emerges is that which customers do institutions listen to? Issues can arise since some of the customer’s “perception of quality can be considered perverse.” (Peters, 1987, p. 102). University personnel who treat students as customers, especially with academic issues, may be easily put into a position where a judgment call must be made which can be considered difficult and not necessarily in the best interest of the institution. Therefore, when examining both sides of this argument and for the purpose of this research, executive students will be treated as customers and the reasons are as follows:

- Executive students pay a premium tuition price for their programs
- Executive students are paying more out of pocket for these programs. In 2001, 44% of all EMBA students were 100% fully financially sponsored and only 9% were self financially sponsored. In 2007, the market has changed as only 33% of EMBA students were fully financially sponsored and 33% of students were self financially sponsored. As one can see, an increased amount of corporations are unwilling to pay full freight for such programs leaving the tuition burden on the EMBA students themselves. (EMBA Council, 2007).
- Full financial corporate sponsorship for Executive MBA Programs from 2001 to 2003 has declined from 44% to 38%. (Shin, 2004). In addition, the percentage of self-sponsored students has increased from 19% to 24% during this same time period. (Shinn, 2004).

This decline in company sponsorship has created a new type of consumer for Executive MBA Programs which can be seen as follows: “EMBA programs are quickly adjusting to satisfy the new consumer—a more demanding, international, self-sponsored executive who’s always on the go.” (Shinn, 2004, p. 31). In addition, executive students, are also already catered to by their universities especially in service areas such as billing, registration and advisement. (Petit, 2004). Therefore, when one combines (1) the premium price of an EMBA program with (2) full financial sponsorship for these programs are decreasing with (3) EMBA students, by definition and practice, are positioned as the most senior student in the MBA program portfolio with (4) executive students are already being catered to with student services issues, for the purpose of this study and the application of the CEM Frameworks, executive students will be considered customers.

CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE MANAGEMENT – PRINCIPLES AND APPLICATIONS

Administrators within Executive MBA Programs can apply various frameworks for marketing and managing the customer experience within the execution of programs. For the purposes of this article, two customer experience frameworks will be presented and examples will be given on their potential application and relevance to EMBA Programs.

Framework I - Behavioral Science

The first framework focuses on improving customer relations and the overall experience through the strategic use of behavioral science. This framework was developed from the research of Richard Chase and Srirani Dasu in which they developed a five (5) step process that can allow for improved and sustainable customer experiences. The framework is as follows:

1. Build commitment via choice
2. Finish Strong—leave lasting impression
3. Get bad experiences out of the way early
4. Segment pleasure with pain
5. Celebrate rituals (Chase and Dasu, 2001).

Within the first step, enthusiasts of behavioral science agree that customers enjoy the product, the brand and the experience when choice is given throughout the entire product offering. (Chase & Dasu, 2001, p. 79). Since customers and/or prospective customers do not like to be told “what to do”, “how to do it”, “what to like” and “how to like it”, choice and/or the perception of choice can create an energized and enthusiastic customer base that can take personal ownership of the product experience in question. This brand ownership can potentially create “product evangelists” among the consumers. (Chase & Dasu, 2001, p. 79).

The concept of choice can easily be applied to the execution of EMBA Programs. Going beyond the typical choice offerings of elective possibilities, executive students can be given choice and/or the perception of choice for a variety of initiatives including the study tour, scheduling and issues such as menu. Giving executive students the possibility of choice even for what at first seems as unimportant issues can have a positive impact, according to Chase and Dasu, on the overall brand and product experience. In addition, it can create an enthusiastic student base that will have a vested interest in the future success of your program.

The second recommendation of “finishing strong” is of critical importance as “the end...remains in the customer’s recollections.” (Chase and Dasu, 2001, p. 73). Executive Programs can easily take note of this recommendation by offering, for example, the international residential as a capstone pedagogical experience just prior to graduation. In addition, gala celebrations beyond the University Commencement in celebrating the completion of the degree is another example of reinforcing the concept of finishing

strong. Such a strategy can leave a wonderful taste in the mouths of the EMBA students which, in the end, can create additional buzz and momentum for a program.

The third principle of “getting the bad experiences out of the way early” is similar to the previous principle. By utilizing this strategy, it allows a level of trust to develop between the customer and vendor that enables the relationship to “finish strong”. (Chase and Dasu, 2001, p. 77). This formulation of trust is critical to any product or service including Executive MBA Programs. For example, if there are any structural and/or programmatic issues within an EMBA Program (i.e. method for selecting electives) that could potentially anger students during the program, then it is best if the students are warned of these issues during the recruitment process. Like with any product, students can be accepting of a program deficiency and can even be forgiving, however the timing of the communication is critical.

The fourth principle of “segment pleasure with pain” is a standard takeaway from any negotiations course. Disney Theme Parks effectively utilize this principle by distracting the customer during the long lines for the rides in which they have to wait. While a ride may only last for ninety (90) seconds, Disney makes those ninety (90) seconds worthwhile by distracting the customers on the long lines and thus “lessening their discomfort” (Chase and Dasu, 2001, p. 78). This principle can be easily applied to EMBA Programs especially with the use of faculty. For example, if there is a faculty member who is not very strong but must teach in the EMBA Program, perhaps that faculty member and the course could be combined or team taught with other courses or other strong faculty members. This can allow this issue of a sub par faculty member to be less of a negative since this person is combined somehow or some way with strong assistance.

The last principle, under this framework, of “celebration of rituals” plays a critical role in the “customer’s perceptions of the experience.” (Chase and Dasu, p. 81). The research indicates that customers can potentially enjoy rituals especially if they are unique to the product. An example of a ritual can be something such as an “afternoon tea time” served in a hotel to the grand opening and celebration of a retail chain to a community. A ritual can also include specific call times scheduled to customers and keeping within those guidelines. It is critical that unique rituals must be established and organizations must stick to those rituals. If creatively done it can certainly differentiate a product or service within the marketplace.

One can apply the principle of rituals to the execution of an Executive MBA Program. For example, such rituals can be something as simple as planned social events and happy hours to alumni networking events and dinner/award celebrations. It can even be something as simple as putting a York Peppermint Patty mint on the seats of the participants during the lunch break, as done by the MIT Sloan School of Management Executive Education Programs as was experienced by this author in 2008. Such a ritual allows participants to not only be surprised and delighted at first but also adds a level of uniqueness and consistency as the program continues. Overall, the five (5) principles of behavioral science that Chase and Dasu describe can be implemented in the management and execution of an EMBA Program. In addition, this framework can also have a substantial impact on the overall customer experience of the students. It is important to note that in the end, “only one thing matters in a service encounter—the customers’ perception of what occurred.” (Chase and Dasu, 2001, p. 82). The implementation of behavioral science can certainly impact this perception.

Framework II – CEM Framework

The second framework that will be explored is the concept of Customer Experience Management developed by Bernd Schmitt. This concept focuses on developing a targeted and branded customer experience to all stakeholders. The framework can be seen as follows:

1. Analyzing the Experiential World of the Customer
2. Building the Experiential Platform
3. Designing the Brand Experience
4. Structuring the Customer Interface
5. Engaging in Continuous Innovation (Schmitt, CEM, 2003, p. 25).

The first step of the framework looks at “analyzing the experiential world of the customer”. When examining one’s own products and brands, Schmitt indicates that it is imperative that organizations try to provide and understand “original insight into the customer’s world”. (Schmitt, 2003, p. 25). More specifically, companies must not only be aware but also must “become more responsive to customers and incorporate customer insight into their strategies and implementations.” (Schmitt, 2003, p. 46). It is of paramount importance to determine what exactly the customer potentially wants from a specific experience from a product or interaction. Understanding the customer and seeing the world from their point of view is critical in this stage. This first step can easily be applied to the execution of Executive MBA Programs. What do EMBA prospective students want to experience from this degree program? Are students just looking for top scale faculty members to teach in the program? Do they want to be part of dynamic and professionally diverse class? Do they want to be pampered by program staff since they are paying a premium in tuition? Do they want to “operationalize” the pedagogy directly back into their professional lives? Do they want a high impact experience beyond the academics with team building exercises? Is it all of the above or some of the above? Is it none of the above? Finding out exactly what prospective and/or current students want from the EMBA Experience and/or determining what they want as a result of getting into their “experiential world” is a critical first step.

Once the experiential world of the customer is determined, the second step in this framework is “building the experiential platform”. Simply stated, this platform “effectively communicates internally and externally what an organization, its brand, and its products stand for and what value they offer to customers.” (Schmitt, 2003, p.87). Similar to a value proposition of a product or service, the “experiential platform” not only focuses on features and benefits that the product or service offers but also on the overall customer experience in obtaining and utilizing the product.

Establishing an experiential platform can certainly be applied to EMBA Programs. What is the entire experiential value proposition that a specific program offers? Directors and Deans, when recruiting students, must be able to discuss the “Branded Customer Experience—which is a service experience that is intentional, consistent, differentiated, and valuable”. (Smith & Wheeler, p. 1). Executive MBA Programs must develop an “experiential platform” beyond the use of top faculty as this feature and benefit is now expected within this industry. (Petit, 2006). Overall, when managing and executing a program, the experiential platform must be used as the foundation to this strategy.

The third step of the process is “designing the brand experience.” This step follows the “building the experiential platform” phase as once the platform and theme are developed, one can move on the design of the brand experience. Such an experience can include “the product, the look and feel surrounding it, and experiential communications.” (Schmitt, CEM, 2003, p. 140). More specifically, the product experience is the focal point for the customer. This experience takes into account the product’s features and benefits as well as the “experiential features” which “serve as a springboard for a customer’s brand experience.” (Schmitt, CEM, 2003, p. 126). These features can include not only how the product works but also the aesthetic appeal associated with the product. Examples of the brand experience can be seen with the look and feel surrounding a product as well as its visual identity around the name, logo, signage, packaging, store design and overall web presence. (Schmitt, 2003, CEM, p. 128).

This third step of “designing the brand experience” can be applied to the execution of EMBA Programs. More specifically, an experiential marketing campaign can certainly be implemented for EMBA

Programs that does not necessarily communicate the products features and benefits but rather a powerful experiential message. For example, a well received method of communicating the program experience can be inviting program alumni to participate in admission information sessions. What occurs when one implements such an initiative is that these alumni become the center of the session answering many questions and discussing the EMBA Program “experience” in detail. There is no better person to illustrate the program experience than current students and graduates. In addition, the brand experience for EMBA Programs can also be designed with the visual identity elements including the look and feel of the classroom and facilities, the logo and signage. These elements can be strategically designed to enhance the experience and reinforce the brand and managing this process is of utmost importance.

The fourth step in this framework is “structuring the customer interface.” According to Schmitt, this is the most difficult step to effectively implement as it involves cooperation and action from the entire personnel of an organization. This communication and exchange that results from this step, for all employees, must be consistent during all customer interfaces. (Schmitt, 2003, CEM, p. 142). Overall, “this interface refers to the dynamic exchange of information and service that occurs between the customer and company—in person, over the phone, online, or in any other way.” (Schmitt, 2003, CEM, p. 141).

The implementation of this step within the execution of an EMBA Program requires determination and diligence. For example, if “dazzling service” is part of the implementation theme for your EMBA Program, then all personnel within the University that have a “touchpoint” with the EMBA students must “walk the talk.” Implementing it, as a result, can be difficult as there are many units outside your jurisdiction (i.e. Bursar, Registrar, etc.) that can have multiple touchpoints with each student. The bottom line is whatever the implementation theme is, structuring the customer interface is a non-stop process that must always be evaluated and reevaluated. It is a step that if done correctly can certainly create product evangelists among any customer base. The last step of “engaging in continuous innovation” refers to innovation not only with the product but also with the entire customer experience. Product innovations can refer to technology, service and experiential innovations. (Schmitt, CEM, 2003, p. 167).

The application of the “continuous innovation” step within an EMBA Program can be seen with the selection of faculty and guest speakers that add value to the program. It can also be seen with the international residential as a pedagogical innovation. In addition, it can be applied to the student service area of registration, billing as well as logistical issues within the international trip. The question one must always ask is how can a program keep providing a specific targeted customer experience and how can this experience continually improve. Creatively combining two separate and potentially incompatible themes such as “EMBA Programs and Holistic Living” and benchmarking best practices outside your industry can be two methods to continually innovate the experience. (Schmitt, 2007). Always reaching for the most innovative experience possible is what this step is all about.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is the recommendation of this research that Executive MBA Program administrators must seriously consider the implementation of the CEM philosophy within their program experience and can do so with both frameworks at varying degrees. As discussed, consumers in society are now engaged within the “Experience Economy”. Within this economy, the features and the benefits of any product or service are now assumed and consumers are now not only desiring a unique experience but are also willing to pay a premium for it. No where is this more applicable than with Executive MBA Programs as the features and benefits of such programs (academic curriculum, outstanding faculty, convenient schedule) are now a given and in order to differentiate a program, a unique, buzz creating experience is desired by students.

In terms of the two frameworks presented, the CEM Framework, generated by Bernd Schmitt, provides the most comprehensive analysis of the entire experiential innovation process. This framework, within its five steps, forces the administration of any program to take a thorough analysis of the entire EMBA experience, examine and inquire what exactly the Executive MBA students want to potentially experience and develop and incorporate an experiential value proposition that is the driving force behind the custom branded experience. Because of its comprehensive approach, the new potential experience that can develop as a result of incorporating the CEM Framework can be an “experiential innovation” that can create market buzz and reposition a brand within a market. Hence, this tool has the potential of creating an “experiential innovation” that can change the market perception of any product or brand, with Executive MBA Programs being no exception.

The second framework of Behavioral Science is also a useful framework however it is most effective when trying to fine tune an already established experience rather than creating an entirely new experiential value proposition. The steps of this framework are more advisory in nature as it provides recommendations and advice on how to improve an already established experience verse creating an entirely new experiential platform. Overall, both frameworks can be very useful for Directors’ of Executive MBA Programs in differentiating their programs. Pending their commitment level in creating an entirely new experiential innovation can dictate the framework that is best suited for each EMBA Program.

IMPLICATIONS ON AACSB ACCREDITATION

Implementing the CEM Frameworks within an Executive MBA Program or even an entire Graduate School of Business Administration can potentially have a positive impact on the AACSB Accreditation process. Overall, according to the AACSB web site, this international accreditation agency for “Schools of Business” assures the following for the multiple stakeholders of an accredited institution. AACSB International accreditation assures stakeholders that business schools:

- Manage resources to achieve a vibrant and relevant mission.
- Advance business and management knowledge through faculty scholarship.
- Provide high-caliber teaching of quality and current curricula.
- Cultivate meaningful interaction between students and a qualified faculty.
- Produce graduates who have achieved specified learning goals (AACSB, web)

More specifically, the goal of the AACSB Accreditation status is to not only assure all of the stakeholders of a particular institution but to also assist the institution itself in delivering the best possible business education that it can deliver. With this said, the CEM Frameworks can have a positive impact on the AACSB Accreditation process and can assist in facilitating with this goal especially with the “advancement of business and management knowledge” as well as the “current curricula.” For example, the ultimate goal of implementing the CEM Frameworks within an EMBA Program is to not only deliver a unique, targeted branded experience but to also create “Program Evangelists” among the students. If this were to successfully occur, there would be a plethora of proactive and supportive graduates of a particular program. Such support can certainly assist a professional school in numerous ways.

It can, for example, increase the institution’s network and support. Such an increase in this area can positively impact the institution from a resources and job placement perspective. It can also create a more active graduate who would be enthusiastic to participate on “Advisory Boards” as well as the strategic planning of the institution. Such strategic planning initiatives could entail curriculum reform and/or incorporating “best practices” within the EMBA or MBA Experience. Overall, having committed graduates who are willing to participate and “give back” in terms of their time, advisement and expertise can only potentially greatly assist with the “advancement of business and management knowledge” as well as the “current curricula.”

Yet to feel the impact of the implementation of such a program will take time. The CEM Frameworks must be strategically implemented throughout the entire twenty two month “EMBA Journey”. Upon graduation, such alumni involvement can commence, however, it will only become stronger, in time, with the success of these stakeholders’ careers. Even as graduates, the CEM Frameworks must continue in order to fully create such a “Program Evangelist.” Therefore, in conclusion, feeling the impact of implementing the CEM Frameworks for AACSB purposes may take time. However, in the long term, it could potentially have a positive impact on the AACSB Accreditation process and the role of the school in advancing business and management knowledge as well as curriculum reform.

CONCLUSIONS

In closing, the goal of this research was to illustrate two recent CEM Frameworks that have emerged within the literature and to discuss why these frameworks must be rigorously applied to the management and execution of Executive MBA Programs. The recommendations of this research, as illustrated within this paper, indicate that positive and memorable customer experiences are critical to the success of any business or organization with EMBA Programs being no exception. With this said, managing each customer interface scenario strategically, may be difficult, but can certainly give any product or service, including EMBA Programs, a competitive advantage within the marketplace and can also create “program enthusiasts” and “product evangelists” among the student body.

This study, though, does have its limitations. Applying such frameworks to a “cohort style” professional school program (Business, Social Work, Education) may be more straightforward than perhaps Ph.D. programs in Arts and Sciences. The reason why is that bonding and camaraderie naturally develop through a cohort format which can also enhance the experience. When the student travels this academic journey more as an individual, such as within a Ph.D. program Arts and Sciences, it may be more difficult to implement such frameworks effectively.

In terms of further study, it would be critical to measure the long term impact of such frameworks in terms of program referrals and alumni giving. Such an analysis would measure the true impact of such frameworks within not only an EMBA Program but other types of professional school programs. It would also be important to measure how such frameworks could be successfully implemented within Ph.D. programs in Arts and Sciences. Overall, increased research is necessary to measure the entire impact of the CEM Frameworks within higher education.

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