

# **A SOCIAL MEDIA CAMPAIGN APPLICATION IN A MARKETING FIELD EXPERIENCE COURSE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Most university students today use social media daily, are knowledgeable about a myriad of applications, and can navigate numerous platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter. Despite their affinity for social media, however, it is not clear whether or not they understand how social media can be used to create effective marketing strategies. This paper describes a social media assignment that was incorporated into a marketing field experience course for undergraduate students. The aim of the paper is to inspire other instructors who may wish to use social media campaigns in their marketing courses. The objective of the assignment was to teach the effective use of social media in marketing by allowing the students to engage in a real-time social media campaign with a major fashion marketer. Student testimonials indicate that this active learning approach successfully assisted our students in understanding the marketing potential of social media.*

**JEL:** M31

**KEYWORDS:** Social Media, Experiential Learning, Marketing, Field Experience

## **INTRODUCTION**

Most university students today use social media daily, are knowledgeable about a myriad of applications, and can navigate numerous platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter. Despite their affinity for social media, however, it is not clear whether or not they understand how social media can be used to create effective marketing strategies. Business educators, aware of the needs of today's businesses for social media-savvy employees, are increasingly teaching, applying, and utilizing Web 2.0 technologies in business courses. However, both the rapid changes in this technology and the lack of precedents in the literature require these educators to learn by trial and error. As the paradigm in teaching philosophies shifts further away from lecture-based passive knowledge transfer towards more hands-on applied experiential learning, the importance of field experience courses becomes more and more evident. This paper describes the innovative way in which a social media marketing assignment was incorporated into a field experience course for undergraduate students.

The aim of the paper is to inspire other instructors who may wish to use social media campaigns in their marketing courses. The paper starts with a brief discussion of the use of social media and experiential learning in business education. It continues by describing the assignment, the objective of which was to teach the effective use of social media in marketing by allowing students to engage in a real-time, social media marketing campaign. While acknowledging its limitations, the author provides readers with possible applications of similar assignments in marketing courses and contributes to the existing limited literature on social media applications in experiential learning and marketing courses. Student testimonials indicate that this active learning approach successfully assisted our students in understanding the marketing potential of social media.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Social media is unquestionably a reality in our lives. The latest editions of marketing textbooks dedicate entire chapters to social media, and the number of books on social media is increasing rapidly. Given the importance of social media in marketing strategy and communication, marketing professors are finding it

a necessity to incorporate it into their courses (Demirbag Kaplan, Piskin, & Bol, 2010, Hollenbeck, Mason, & Song, 2011, Lowe & Laffey, 2011, Buzzard, Crittenden, Crittenden, & McCarty, 2011, Granitz & Koernig, 2011, Payne, Campbell, Bal, & Piercy, 2011, Rinaldo, Tapp, & Laverie, 2011). The Internet technology once deemed to be the future of marketing education (Atwong and Hugstad, 1997) has become its present. The traditional paradigm of education characterized by lectures with passive knowledge transfer from instructors to students and impersonal relationships between the two is being replaced by new paradigms that advocate socially co-constructed knowledge through experiential learning (Granitz and Koernig, 2011). Kolb (1984, p. 41) defines experiential learning as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience.”

Research indicates that experiential projects increase student motivation and engagement, enhance team management and communication skills, and promote the learning of technical and theoretical knowledge (Payne, Campbell, Bal, & Piercy, 2011). By nature, marketing is an ever-evolving discipline that must keep up with the latest technological and cultural changes. In order to have a distinct advantage over their peers in the job market, marketing students should be well equipped with the latest knowledge and technology in the field of social media marketing. Twitter has been used successfully to engage students in experiential learning and also as a medium for direct communication with students to generate discussion and interest in the course topics and examples (Rinaldo, Tapp, & Laverie, 2011, Lowe & Laffey, 2011). Similarly, blogging as part of a marketing management course has been shown to provide an experiential exercise in marketing while producing significant improvement in students’ soft skills (Demirbag Kaplan, Piskin, & Bol, 2010).

Granitz and Koernig (2011) claim that “[a]lthough both experiential learning and Web 2.0 tools focus on creativity, sharing, and collaboration, sparse research has been published integrating a Web 2.0 paradigm with experiential learning in marketing” (p. 57). They position Web 2.0 as “a philosophy that can advance experiential learning through greater student construction of pedagogical materials, by bringing more of the outside world into the classroom and by modifying the role of the professor” (p. 57). In an effort to keep up with the latest shifts in educational philosophy, our marketing department highly encourages industry collaborations in which our students work for and with business partners. Examples of experiential learning and Web 2.0 applications can be found throughout our curriculum. This paper contributes to the field of marketing education by describing and analyzing an application of social media combined with experiential learning.

### The Course and the Assignment

Field experience courses are a required part of the marketing curriculum at our university. The Principles of Marketing course is a prerequisite for all other marketing courses. All marketing students are required to have an understanding of the basic foundation of marketing concepts and theories before moving on to more application-based, theory-heavy courses. It is also mandatory for the students to prepare a complete marketing plan in their principles course. The course in this case was a field experience in New York City that was offered in the spring semester of 2012. A group of ten female and three male marketing and fashion marketing undergraduate majors at a West Coast university spent a week in NYC in March during their spring break as part of their field experience course. During a period of five business days, students visited several companies across a variety of industries, including a clothing design firm, a marketing communications agency, an automotive company, an international magazine for teenagers, and a media and entertainment company. The students interacted with company executives during presentations on a wide range of topics. For example, the Senior Vice President of Global Communications of a company we visited focused on how the effectiveness of social media campaigns used for public relations is measured, and the Director of Digital Event Marketing of the automotive company described how they use social media to market automobiles via their sponsorship of New York Fashion Week.

For the purposes of the social media assignment, all of the female students were given a tote bag by a well-known international shoe/bag/accessories brand and were required to carry this bag with them at all times during the field trip. The company which provided the bags requested that the students take photos of the bag and post them on social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr, and Twitter. All students either had existing accounts already or opened accounts for the first time in the above-mentioned social media applications. Some of the students also had their own micro-blogs, which they utilized for the purposes of this assignment.

### Assessment of the Assignment's Effectiveness

The main learning goals of the assignment were to demonstrate communication skills and incorporate theory with practice by using social media as part of their field experience. As mentioned above, throughout the duration of the assignment, students were given presentations by industry executives on how they utilize social media in their campaigns. These campaign examples improved their understanding of how social media can be used and also increased their appreciation for this new medium. Among the many skills students acquired, they learned what a hash tag (#) is, how to use it, and its importance. The photos they posted on various social media platforms were distributed to other outlets reaching social audiences. The students were able to immediately observe the impacts of the photos they posted online on their accounts. The company which sponsored the campaign was extremely pleased with the results and subsequently expressed the desire to work with our students again. According to the company's social media reports, the tote bag became the bestselling handbag on the company's website for the duration of the social media campaign. While not all of the campaign's success can be attributed to our students, they had a remarkable role in it. The students who participated in the social media assignment were asked to write about their experiences related to the assignment at the end of the course in May 2012. As can be seen in the following accounts, the students' learning experiences were all very positive:

*Student 1: Throughout the trip we would take pictures of the bag, with the bag, pretty much anything we can think of that included the bag. Then the images were posted on Instagram using a special hash tag. Prior to this campaign, I had only heard the term hash tag; now I know how they are used throughout platforms such as Instagram and Twitter. I only used Instagram for this campaign since the iPhone app had recently become a popular channel to share images. However, after the campaign I decided it would be beneficial as a future marketing professional to open a Twitter account as well. The [name of the company] campaign was a great experience for me, considering I was not using social media prior to this. Promoting the bag on social media was not only fun; it reached a vast audience without the costs of advertising. During the trip we learned that impressions made on social media platforms can actually be measured in terms of advertising costs. Friends and random individuals were commenting on the bag, ultimately engaging with us and building awareness of the brand. I think of it as a cheap form of product placement in the lives of somewhat ordinary people. Since we are more approachable and are not explicitly trying to sell something, others feel more at ease and will listen to the message they are being given about the product. Overall the [name of the company] campaign made me realize the importance of social media for the new age of marketing.*

Others shared the experiences reported by Student 1. The experiential learning enabled by this assignment added to their knowledge about social media.

*Student 2: The feedback I received along with what other fellow students received blew my mind. We were actually marketing this tote and marketing it right. It was truly a great learning experience. For me personally, it made me love marketing on a different level because it allowed me to view it from a different perspective.*

*There is only so much you can learn from school, but the way you apply your knowledge proves your passion and love for the field you go into. The [name of the company] Campaign taught me that marketing holds the key for many companies and reminded me of the importance of a good marketing plan. It allowed me to use the tools I was taught about marketing and applying it to this campaign. People were quick to respond to the tweets and Instagram posts I had and people were growing more interested in this tote as the days went by. I think by day 5 of our trip, this tote was famous. Numerous professors have taught me that social media holds a certain power in marketing and this campaign justified that. It taught me firsthand the high response rate when marketing a product on social media. I was shocked at the amount of retweets and positive feedback I was receiving on the different social media platforms. The word spreads fast on social media. What fascinated me were people posting the link to where consumers interested in the tote can purchase it. I have always been a strong believer in marketing because, in my opinion, without marketing the world would not go round. The [name of the company] Campaign was my first stepping-stone to the exciting and fascinating world of marketing. When I think back and reminisce on my New York City trip, the first memory that pops to mind is the Other Bag by [name of the company].*

The following student emphasizes the innovative and creative nature of the assignment and compares social media marketing to traditional marketing.

*Student 3: It was a phenomenal experience for my fellow classmates and I to have because we learned that even students can bring awareness to a brand or product not through billboards or commercials, but through our very own social media platforms with a few little hashtags. It was a fun experience and taught our class how to be creative and innovative with products. Social media has taken over the marketing world and brings more attention to a brand than traditional campaigns.*

As mentioned above, social media is still relatively new and is slowly making its way into marketing education. The lack of precedents in the literature compels instructors to learn from their own experiences. A limited number of learning outcomes can be achieved in one course or assignment. Experiential learning and social media application were the emphasis of this assignment. While it was mandatory for the female students to participate in the assignment, they were not graded on it. The students did not prepare the social media marketing plan but had a role in applying it. This in itself, as is evident from the students' testimonials, was a valuable learning experience. It was also a valuable learning experience for the instructor, who subsequently used this experience in a media marketing course in which students were required to create a complete social media marketing plan.

#### Possible Challenges and Limitations of Adaptability

Given that the majority of the students were highly familiar with social media and owned a smart phone, no major challenges were encountered during this particular experience. Possible challenges might include finding a company to work with and students not having smart phones, both vital factors for the effectiveness of the assignment. In this case, the product—a tote bag—was something the students could easily use. However, due to the nature of the product that the company wanted the students to market, the three male students had to be excluded from the assignment. Still, almost any consumer product could be used and perhaps make the assignment more inclusive, as well as more challenging and interesting.

This assignment can easily be adapted for other marketing courses. Even though the fact that our students visited New York City for a week was the main reason why the fashion company wanted to work with them, this campaign could also be executed without tying it to a field experience course. As part of a consumer behavior course, for example, students might work with different companies and target

different target markets. For a marketing research course, students could be asked to focus on social media analytics and measure the effectiveness of their campaign in terms of outreach. Finally, it would be a most suitable assignment for a course in social media marketing.

## **CONCLUDING COMMENTS**

As an educator, I strive to prepare my students to enter the business world upon graduation. This requires them to have solid theoretical knowledge and opportunities for practical applications. I believe that marketing is best taught with hands-on experience that allows them to apply theory to real-life situations. The main objective of this paper was to describe an assignment that was carried out in 2012 and to inspire business school instructors in general and marketing professors in particular to utilize web-based technologies in their courses. As a result of this assignment, students executed a social media marketing campaign and applied their marketing knowledge and skills in a real-world situation. Some of the students were introduced to some of the applications for the first time, and others were already familiar with them and had been using them for a while. In both cases, the students experienced firsthand the impact of social media by engaging in a campaign. This assignment added a new dimension to their field experience.

The presentations on social media marketing campaigns given by the company executives we visited enhanced their knowledge on the topic. The students' comments about their experiences with the assignment express their belief that the application of a social media marketing campaign in a field experience course was an invaluable learning experience resulting in enhanced learning outcomes. While the assignment might pose certain limitations in terms of applicability, such as students not having smart phones or not finding a business partner with whom to collaborate, it can also be altered and adapted to a variety of marketing and business courses, as suggested above. Combining the latest technology in the field of marketing with an experiential learning assignment enabled the students to practice what they learn in their marketing courses. Social media is integral to the future of marketing strategy and application. Therefore, it is imperative to create a marketing curriculum that encompasses the latest technological changes.

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## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

The author wishes to thank Wendy Bendon for her collaboration during the execution of the assignment.

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