

Marketing a Brand That Is You

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'Start Here. Go Anywhere' is the BMCC motto that we see emblazoned on subway cars, websites and college brochures. The question of how we can provide a road-map to help our students undertake this journey to 'anywhere' is what I grappled with for a few semesters in my marketing class. In answer to this question I developed an innovative teaching exercise called '*Marketing A Brand That is You*' that used the principles of marketing to help students learn how to take this journey to 'anywhere' as they developed a career-plan to market themselves to future employers. This teaching exercise helps students develop greater self-awareness and explore potential career opportunities that are in synch with their own interests and aptitudes. Going through this exercise not only increases students' chances of academic and professional success but also empowers them to take responsibility for their future learning and professional growth.

Marketing is defined "*as an organizational function and a set of processes for creating, communicating and delivering value to customers and for managing customer relationships in ways that benefit the organization and its stakeholders*" (AMA 2004). This definition of marketing can be applied to our own selves just as it can be to products, services, organizations, and events. Self-marketing can be defined as the way we know, work, and plan to align our career with our personal goals and aspirations keeping in mind the needs of customers. Who are the customers that we have to market ourselves to? It is our potential employers and people who will open doors for us.

More than ever before, lower job security and high levels of competition at the workplace require that our students view themselves as brands that need to be effectively marketed to these employers. Self-marketing is not simply about blowing one's own trumpets and communicating one's strong points. It requires in-depth knowledge of the customer's needs and successful creation of a product that can fulfill these needs. Our professional success will be based on the extent to which we can develop ourselves to match the changing needs of the marketplace. Self-marketing then is an important skill for our students to learn.

Motivation for the Exercise

Community college students need greater guidance in developing self-marketing plans compared to other students. A large proportion of those attending community colleges are first generation college-students with neither parents having gone to college (CCSSE 2005; Willet 1989). These students do not have role models to guide them on how to navigate their college career and translate their college experience to a vocation that match their interests and aptitudes. Students from community colleges come from a lower socio-economic background compared to baccalaureate students (Bailey 2004). Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds may receive support from family members in their careers but do not necessarily receive enough direction on career planning (Usinger 2005).

The low salience of career guidance at home is transferred to the academic environment. The Community College Survey on Student Engagement (2005) reports that a third of community college students do not speak about career plans with an instructor or advisor. It, therefore, recommends that community colleges should actively provide career counseling to its students. This is important because studies have demonstrated that career planning is a strong

predictor of student engagement and academic success (Kenny et al. 2006) and that college students who have a career plan are likely to do better academically (Thombs 1995).

In order to address this lack of career orientation, this teaching tool was designed to help students in my marketing class explore career options and outline a tentative career plan recognizing their personal values, aspirations, backgrounds and unique strengths. It is expected that as students visualize their future goals and actively consider their career direction, learning about themselves and ways to reach their goals, they will be empowered to take responsibility for their learning and become more actively engaged with their college education focusing on courses and materials that lead them to their career destination.

Description Of Teaching Tool

The National Career Development guidelines (<http://www.acrnetwork.org/ncdg.htm>) lists three areas important for developing a successful career. These are (1) personal development and self-knowledge, (2) awareness of the career trends and requirements to meet career goals, and (3) ability to meet and adapt to changing requirements of the career fields by developing a practice of lifelong learning. This teaching exercise focuses on these three areas of competency.

The exercise is divided into five modules that students complete during the course of the semester that correspond with specific sections in the marketing course. These modules are described below.

Module 1: "Who Am I?"

The first module 'Who Am I?' focuses on self-knowledge. This module requires students to look at their past experiences, parental influences, and other role models that have shaped their personal and work values. The module also requires students to take self-assessment tests

that help them consider their aptitudes, work interests and skills. 'Who Am I?' is developed as a digital story with students incorporating relevant images, music, quotes that represent their self-image.

Module 2: "Lay of the Land"

Awareness of career trends and requirements to meet career goals is covered in the second module referred to as 'Lay of the Land'. This module intends to strengthen students research skills as they explore career trends, educational requirements and skills required for different types of job positions.

Module 3: "How Do I Fit?"

The third module is a strategic decision-making module that students have to develop in order to meet their career goals . It requires students to consider how best they can adapt to the requirements of the career field and helps students sharpen their analytical skills as they complete a personal Strength-Weakness-Opportunity-Threat (SWOT) analysis.

Module 4: "The Road Map"

The fourth module is a time-based plan that students have to develop in order to meet their career goals. This module requires students to consider their academic preparation, personal skills, and work experience that they need to have in order to be able to obtain their desired position in a competitive world. As students develop milestones that they have to achieve in order to get to their final destination they get a clearer picture of how they must prioritize their life between work, school and family to achieve these milestones.

Module 5: "Reaching Out"

The fifth module, 'Reaching Out' focuses on an area that is not covered by the National Career Development guidelines but is nevertheless important for professional success. It is

about learning how to network, develop skills to interact positively with others and create a resume that focuses on the needs of the employer.

Effectiveness of the Teaching Tool

The teaching tool benefits students on four counts. It leads to (1) a stronger career identity, (2) increased self-awareness, (3) better understanding of marketing as a process and (4) development of technical and presentation skills using PowerPoint. The effectiveness of the exercise was evaluated through content analysis of the first module, 'Who Am I?' completed by students close to the beginning of the semester and an open-ended survey at the end of the semester. The survey asked students to respond to how they felt and the value they perceived in (a) working on the different modules of the self-marketing plan, and (b) using PowerPoint in order to develop their digital story.

Career Identity

In the first module of the project, Who Am I?, students had to write about their career interests and work values. A content analysis of their reports indicated that most students were not clear as to what career path they would like to follow. More importantly, many appeared rudderless and did not have strong work values guiding their future choices.

"Over the last five years after I migrated to the United States, I am not sure I recognized the person I had become. I was quite unhappy career wise. I was not doing something that was fulfilling and stimulating. But instead of what needed to be done to correct this short coming I simply drifted with the wind...and pretty much the direction didn't matter."

At the end of the semester students reported what they had learned from undertaking this project in an open-ended survey. The project appeared to have helped students think of their future career based on a greater understanding of themselves.

"The project is good with respect to getting a more realistic view of my talents and how these would best be applied to the future career that I plan to go into."

"It helped in knowing where you would like to see yourself in future and what needs to be done to reach that goal."

Self-Awareness

The first module, 'Who Am I?' encourages in students self-reflection, an increased awareness of the different influences in their lives and gives them a stronger sense of identity. It helps students reflect on their authentic self and may serve as a warning bell allowing students to see if their academic and career path are aligned with what they truly value.

"I think the most important value of this project is that we find out and explore ourselves at a deep level. I learned a little more about myself when I did this project. It brought back memories that I had almost forgotten about".

Internalizing Marketing Principles

The effectiveness of this teaching exercise in providing an opportunity to students to internalize the marketing concepts that they were studying can be seen from the following quotes.

"This [exercise] made me realize that at every step I have to include some of these concepts: decision-making, recognizing my problem, sub-cultural influences, learning, the core American culture, social influences, family influences, needs, motives, search, action, problem solving, self

concept theory, routine decision making. I realize that everyday in my life I am going through the motions of Marketing."

Presentation Skills

Marketers need to have strong presentation skills and be good story-tellers. It was hoped that this teaching exercise would strengthen students' technical and presentation skills as they used PowerPoint to develop their digital stories and tell it in a way that was authentic but also interesting for their audience.

"The biggest value is to learn how to choose the important things that you want to show about yourself or any other product you try to market. The other thing that is good is the experience of working with PowerPoint."

Conclusion

This assignment was developed for an introductory course in Marketing. Even though it was motivated by the lack of career direction in community college students, four-year college students could benefit equally from this project. As a teaching tool that enables students to explore their interests, aptitudes, role models, values, this exercise may also be used in other courses such as consumer behavior or even in introductory course in other disciplines such as sociology, psychology or career counseling where self-concept and its correlates are covered. By offering this innovative learning assignment early on in the students' college life they can continue to use this tool for planning and assessment over the rest of their college experience.

References

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Appendix A

Guidelines for Developing Students' Self-Marketing Plan

Introduction

It is 2011, five years since you graduated from college. Based on your interests, talents and aptitudes that you sharpened while at college you have found the career path that truly satisfies you. The college has invited you back as one of their treasured alumni. You are addressing a group of students who want to know how they too can accomplish their dreams. Tell them how you had to first learn about who you are and the plan that you created to reach your career goals. Please discuss the self-marketing plan that you had created that helped you get where you are today.

Who Am I – Understanding Yourself

Tell Your Story (It may help to have a partner to whom you can tell your story)

- Brief Introduction: Speak about where you have come from, your family and close friends, what defines you as a person and significant events in your life
- Turning Point: Describe a point in time which had a great impact on your life and changed you forever; explain how it changed you and what you learned from that time)
- Interests, skills and achievements: Talk about things that you do in your time outside work/school; what are some important achievements in your life.
- Role models: Talk about some people who had a significant impact on your life. What inspired you about these people? What are important values in your life?
- Career Vision: Talk about what you wanted to achieve professionally that satisfied both your professional as well as personal goals.

Lay of the Land: Analysis of External Environment

- What are some career options that interest you? Indicate the trends in these career options based on research, industry reports on these different career options. Using O*Net (www.onet.com), a career exploration site provide some highlights of the opportunities and threats in these different career options.
- Based on an assessment of the trends in the fields of your choice indicate the one that seemed most attractive to you. What are the qualities necessary for a person to succeed in this field?

How Do I Fit? Analysis of Internal Environment

- The career center offers online self-assessment tests that will indicate your strengths and weakness as it pertains to different career options. What does the **Self-Directed Search** suggest about your personality type? Go to <http://www.nyjobzone.org>, get your free account and check out the online self-exploration tools. Develop your profile online on Career Interests. Does the assessment feel right to you? Provide a list of the work values that were important to you and the occupations that offer these values using the Work Importance Profiler.
- Present your personal SWOT analysis outlining the opportunities and threats in the career field of interest to you and your strengths and weaknesses as reflected in the self-assessment tests. What unique values did you bring to this career field that set you apart from competition?

Personal Development Strategy

Discuss the plan that you developed to find your dream job on the following criteria.

Please indicate your accomplishments on each of the following aspects and the significant milestones.

- Education – Academic preparation – courses, credits, GPA. What did you learn from these different courses that helped you along the way?
- Jobs & Internships – What did you learn in these interim jobs and internships? What types of contacts did you seek to develop that could help you later in finding a job and advising you on the right type of position.

- Personal development – Discuss leadership training, public speaking, organizing, creative writing, mentoring and other kinds of skills that you learned in your classes as well as through extra-curricular activities.

Reaching Out

Share with the students the resume that you developed at the last year of your school that indicated your goals, accomplishments and contributions. Demonstrate how the resume was based on all that you have done and accomplished until Year 2010 and how it was specially targeted for the employer and the position that you were seeking.