

Marketing the Marketer:  
Creativity, Collaboration and Community Creation for Career Development

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An Application for the Newell Innovative Teaching Award

## **Background and Motivation**

Digital Marketing, MKT 437, is an upper-level elective which was initially created to provide an overview of the theories and strategic development of marketing plans for the digital age. What is interesting about this field is that there are no textbooks that appropriately cover the material and therefore, the content of the course is ever-changing to keep up with the latest trends and revolutions in online platforms and other online applications. For this reason, the course was initially designed in the typical lecture-discussion method of teaching, serving more as an informative class connecting previous marketing course content to new technological updates and research in the field. With that said, I have spent a lot of time thinking during my time at Union about the way that our curriculum is designed in terms of the required courses and the outcomes associated with said courses. Although we do an excellent job of preparing our students theoretically, I felt as if we were missing the mark on developing some courses which not only equipped students to do the type of work expected of them when they are in their future careers, but also to have intelligent conversations and more effectively collaborate with tangentially related fields of study. Accordingly, I spent some time speaking to a few acquaintances who work in marketing departments for different sized corporations to understand the work flow, software applications and daily collaborations that are expected of them in their roles as marketers. I also read a lot of more recent publications and popular press on employability in the field. One such article discussed the most sought-after soft skills that employers are seeking: creativity, persuasion collaboration, adaptability and time management.

With these industry trends and future expectations in mind and armed with the primary data from research, I set out to re-think and re-design my initial Digital Marketing course in a way that would offer our students the opportunity to not only develop and learn skills that are important to changing work environments but also those skills that are in high demand by employers. I decided to develop a semester long project that combined the use of the newest applications and online software being used by marketers in the real world within a project where the goal would be to assist the students in developing those aforementioned soft skills while simultaneously introducing them to the software and computer applications used throughout digital content creation and planning activities, not only by individuals in marketing, but also by those in closely

related fields like graphic design. The understanding of other fields becomes especially important (as I gleaned from one of my conversations with a practitioner) in smaller firms where they may not have the resources to hire their own graphic design team.

### **Description of the Project**

The project I developed for the course involves challenging students to work in groups, brainstorm an original idea for a company, organization or cause, and then, to develop a strategic digital marketing plan for that company. The students then go through the process of planning, implementing and analyzing a social media marketing campaign for their brand using cutting edge technology and other online applications. The goal of the project, is for the students to not only plan and implement their intensive 30-day, 3 platform social media campaign, but also to be flexible enough along the way to make adaptations on the go as they learn the content of the course and are challenged to respond to (un)surprising analytical results. Students are given guidelines in terms of the minimum number of expected posts per day on each platform, but the style and type of content is up to them. Grading is based on analytics such as the number of followers gained and other measures of engagement, so they truly need to invest time critical thinking about the best method to reach their intended audience and how to best get them to interact with the content. The course is also competitive in nature as the students are challenged to organically grow their brand faster than the other groups in the class.

The project has been woven into the course schedule in a way that allows them to learn along the way and continually improve their marketing communication and creative skills. Using a flipped classroom approach with pre-recorded video lectures and both popular press and research-based articles brings the students to class already prepared and allows us to not only spend more time discussing the content, but also work together making connections to the content in the context of the project that runs throughout the course. Along the way, students are taught the basics of graphic design and composition that are non-traditional topics in marketing classrooms, as well as project management and other more traditional marketing content and theory such as approaches to advertising and customer relationship management. The students work in small groups of 3-4 and assign roles and responsibilities much like they would on a design team or marketing committee. They are encouraged to swap roles each week of the month-long implementation period so that everyone gets an

opportunity to lead and do administrative work, create graphics and write copy. Finally, students are asked to reflect individually in a written document at the end of the project what they have learned over the course of the class, what they did and didn't enjoy, why they think they were successful and what they would improve given the opportunity to continue building their brand.

### **How the Project Differs from Current Teaching Ideas and Methods in the field**

Although the course itself is innovative in nature due to the everchanging technological improvements in the field, I believe that what is truly different about this project is the opportunity for students to learn at the intersection of their field and some other inter-related fields. Many current offerings in digital marketing classrooms across the country use simulation platforms for students to learn how to market products giving them pre-set companies or industries and allow them to manipulate numerical values which are proxies for real world decisions. For example, if a student who was managing a bike company in a digital marketing simulation wanted to increase the spending for advertising on a social media platform for a specific demographic, they might change the value from 400 to 500, indicating that they wanted to increase spending in this area. While these simulations can be valuable in their own sense, I didn't believe that they would enhance as many of the aforementioned skills employers are looking for. In other words, I wanted this project to teach the whole student as opposed to just focusing on one skill. Accordingly, in developing this project I wanted the students to have creative and strategic control over the entire process. As such, the redesigned flipped classroom approach allows me to act as a facilitator and spend more time with students discussing the concepts in terms of how their readings and video lectures apply to the ongoing course project during our scheduled class meetings. Further, unlike the simulation, branding decisions such as color selection and logo design, as well as the actual graphic design of the content adhering to their brand and style guide are completely left to the students, allowing them to think creatively and wrestle with ideas typically found in different fields of study like the psychology behind color selection. Most importantly, I have found ways to implement industry standard and cutting-edge software into the project; tools that students will likely use in their future careers as members of the workforce.

Throughout the project, students are introduced to online platforms such as Hootsuite (a social media management software) and Airtable (an online spreadsheet and database tool which has the ability to store

images and has creative templates for project management and assignment of tasks). Students are trained in the basics of both, but more importantly are given the opportunity to earn two industry accepted certifications for free as part of an educational program (the certifications usually cost \$300). These certifications are a great resume builder and wonderful addition to their LinkedIn profiles during their future job search. I have also managed to acquire funding from our IT department to allow for Adobe Creative Suite software to be installed on the computers in the BAC computer lab so that the students can learn some basic graphic design skills. Although typical marketing jobs with larger firms do not require students to actually design content (often that is left to graphic designers), they will have to interact and have an educated conversation with them. Further, if students are hired in a smaller firm they should be immediately be more valuable to their firm (and thus more likely to become employed) than a traditionally trained representative.

This opportunity for marketing students to learn basic graphic design skills alongside strategic marketing theories and concepts to my knowledge is not done in any marketing classrooms, as the majority of marketing professors across the country lack the requisite skills to teach Adobe Photoshop, Illustrator etc. Since I practice many of these skills in the field through my side venture, this course offers a unique opportunity for me to share my passions with our students to work in the intersection between marketing and graphic design. Further, within the project, we discuss the implications and perception of persuasion vs. manipulation in digital platforms from a faith-based perspective; a uniquely Union angle for a course which allows students to wrestle with how far to push the envelope in the creation of their digital content.

### **Opinion of the Success of the Project and How it can Be Improved**

I believe that this initial foray into a real-world project management-based project has been fairly successful, but I believe that there are even more opportunities to expand this project in the future. I have already had some initial discussions with professors in the Art and Communications departments which would allow for even more collaboration and possible cross-curricular expansion. I think as a next step, this may be the best opportunity for students to use their knowledge from specific majors within the schools to work together towards a common goal and as a result, develop each other's working knowledge. Further, I think this project could be expanded in two other ways. First, by allowing students to actually sell a product which they would

market during the course of the project allowing them to see the complete impact of marketing on sales.

Secondly, by finding an organization willing to let our students improve their branding, user experience and social media marketing accounts, students would be able to gain experience working on a real-life brand as well as an understanding of how to work within existing style and branding guidelines. These two improvements would of course come with many obstacles to overcome and would require much further consideration and higher-level approvals before implementing.