

## TEACHING THE REAL WORLD

Randall L. Schultz

University of Iowa

### **Making Courses Real**

A common cliché in business schools is that a course or program is about the “real world.” This implies that teaching can be about the real world if only courses use real-world materials and real-world examples. Cases, for example, could be used to show how real companies faced—and perhaps solved—“real” business problems. Discussions of these cases are represented as a way to immerse the student in the current of business activities, hopefully with reference to the actual managers who dealt with this “reality.” These case discussions usually begin or end with the instructor’s admonition that “There are no right or wrong answers to this case.” The case, it may be further explained, is simply a tool for discussing issues; perhaps at best some kind of analysis will be done where students tally up lists of strengths and weaknesses, the plan with more strengths being declared the “winner.”

Learning with no “correct” answers is pointless. All answers (and decisions) are not created equal; some answers are better than others. And, surprisingly, even the most complex business decisions can be reduced to a series of logical imperatives. All one needs is an approach based on logic and empathy—plus a willingness to abandon the artificial world of textbooks and replace it with the real world of current business and marketing activity.

So my courses do not use textbooks, do not use historical cases, do not use simulations and do not tell students that there are no right answers. In their place I use *The Wall Street Journal* for context, the Problem Solving Format for logic and real-time

cases or entrepreneurial projects to achieve in students what I call “internalized” knowledge.

### Role of *The Wall Street Journal*

In both Marketing Management, which relies entirely on it, and Web Business Strategy, which relies partially on it, *The Wall Street Journal* becomes the course “textbook.” This provides a common background for discussing current marketing plans and results. Often it is possible to read about a plan being put into effect and then observe the results of that plan within the period of the semester. In other cases, students may learn about the results later and hopefully remember discussing the situation and perhaps even making predictions about it. Since *The Wall Street Journal* is the source of many classroom examples, students can follow up on these examples after class to see if they really understand the point being made.

If it were simply a matter of reading the newspaper, the goal of internalized knowledge would not be met. What is needed is a logical framework for structuring and solving marketing problems and then a way to gain experience with this framework. The logical framework used is called the Problem Solving Format and the devices used to gain experience with it are cases in Marketing Management and projects in Web Business Strategy.

### Marketing Management

Marketing Management is based on a logical approach to solving marketing problems called the Problem Solving Format (PSF). The PSF starts with needs and wants because that is the most fundamental aspect of marketing success (i.e., products that don’t meet them don’t succeed). So a new product may *not* meet needs and wants, but a current brand that is meeting needs and wants may still have a problem with positioning. Brands with good positioning strategies may have poor delivery on product promises. And brands that meet product promises may have inconsistent tactical (3 P’s) strategies.

Finally, the best of plans may be rendered ineffective by smart competitors—hence so-called MAGIC strategies to protect the plan against competitive reaction. Interestingly, this tight logical connection is not a feature of most marketing textbooks.

Students in Marketing Management create Workbooks that demonstrate knowledge of the application of marketing concepts to real situations. Students choose articles from *The Wall Street Journal* to illustrate the application of concepts covered in the course and in prior courses. They then state their opinion about whether it represents a good or bad application of the concept or, what amounts to the same thing, whether the planned action will be successful or not. Through practice, students develop the ability to use marketing concepts in productive ways. It is often the case that student insights into real marketing problems are more objective than those of the companies themselves. This results in students in the class making “calls” about the future success of product strategies. Sometimes it is possible to see the results of these marketing plans during the semester. These Workbooks not only serve to help students internalize marketing knowledge, but also to improve their writing skills.

Cases are used in Marketing Management, but they are not historical ones. In fact, to some they may hardly resemble cases. A case in Marketing Management is the name of a brand, say Nike. OK, no need for a 30-page document. No need for a historical review. It’s just Nike. Like if you were the brand manager for Nike: What do you do with this brand?

The Problem Solving Format requires nothing more than the brand name. By following it students learn if there *is* a problem for the brand. For a case on Coca-Cola that as a byproduct examines the slogan “Life Tastes Good,” students may end up with the course’s trademark phrase “What the hell does that mean?” What they would be saying is that, for a brand with a certain positioning strategy, which logically implies a certain core benefit proposition, “Life Tastes Good” has nothing to do with that and thus is a useless slogan. This is a right answer that is simultaneously a real world answer.

## Web Business Strategy

If two courses use the same teaching philosophy and rely in whole or in part on the Problem Solving Format, they would be expected to be similar. But Web Business Strategy is as different from Marketing Management as HTML is different from English. Students in Web Business Strategy learn about e-commerce through lectures, readings and the creation of a Web business as a project. To assess learning on e-commerce through lectures and readings, students can maintain a Notebook, which parallels the Workbook assignment in Marketing Management in that it emphasizes self-learning and thus places a large portion of students' grades in their control. There is no textbook used in Web Business Strategy. They're available. But they are obsolete before they are printed. "Microsoft may partner with AOL." No—it's Google, and yesterday's news.

The main feature of Web Business Strategy is an original project. Here students create Web businesses in the form of Web sites (which means that they must first learn to *create* Web sites). This approach is completely real world since the sites are original and either entrepreneurial or related to an existing (typically family-related) business. Students don't use "baby HTML" (FrontPage), but learn to code in real HTML; they don't copy graphics, but learn to create them. They put all of this together in a project, many of which end up having such strong potential that they went or are going "live." The so-called AdSpace page on the course Web site presents such sites and student comments on "What I have learned."

### Course Web Sites

There is enough that is different about my teaching philosophy and my courses that using a canned course platform such as Blackboard or ICON is less desirable than creating unique Web sites from scratch. Besides, this is how one becomes an expert with HTML, CSS, JavaScript, etc.—necessary to have credibility to teach Web Business Strategy. (An instructor should have *done* something first before teaching it.)

Unlike ICON-type sites, these course Web sites operate 365 days a year. They have themselves received recognition on the Web. They are entirely consistent with the philosophy of teaching the real world.

Many of the unique concepts that make up Marketing Management and Web Business Strategy are featured in a Web-based “virtual text” called *Marketing Problem Solving* at <http://www.theproduct.com/marketing>. The course Web sites themselves are at <http://www.theproduct.com/courses/147> and <http://www.theproduct.com/courses/105>.

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