



## best practices

### Using Advertising Curricula for Service Learning: A Case Study

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**A**ccording to Harris Wofford, chief executive officer, Corporation for National Service, "the key to teaching good citizenship is doing it" (1997, p. 4). The opportunity to do just that presented itself in a recent capstone advertising course at Texas Tech University. While at first glance one might think advertising does not lend itself to such efforts, examples from Smoky Bear to McGruff (the Crime Dog) serve as reminders that the advertising industry has long favored public service efforts. Integrating such activities into a college advertising curriculum turned out to be a service-learning experience of considerable public benefit.

Most college advertising programs have similar pedagogical structures, calling for a basic introduction and principles class followed by specialized classes: research, media buying and analysis, and cases and management. Curricular matter merges in the advertising-campaigns class in which students execute what they have learned in previous coursework into an integrated marketing campaign. Campaigns consist of primary and secondary research of the target market, a proposed media buy, the creation of actual creative material (print advertising, television scripts, outdoor boards, etc.), an evaluation component to measure campaign success, and budget accountability (known in the industry as a speculative campaign presentation). Students report results of their work in a professional manner: They prepare a campaign book, give a multimedia campaign presentation, and hold a question-and-answer session with the client or faculty. After the class exercise, the client is encouraged to use any and all materials generated by the students. In fact, students relinquish copyright on materials created for the class at the beginning of the semester, ensuring the client ownership of all generated materials.

In many cases, the course involves using a industry-simulation approach, dividing the class into competing advertising agencies

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trying to get an account. Some educators use actual clients to emphasize the industry practice of obtaining an advertising account from a "real-world" client. In fact, since the 1970s the American Advertising Federation College Chapter program has executed the client-supported National Student Advertising Competition, in which students in AAF chapters across the nation compete in answering the marketing problem. Fifteen district winners advance to the national finals, at which the actual client serves as judge.

One attempt to bring public service into the advertising classroom came from the International Newspaper and Marketing Executives Association (INAME), which teamed up with the American Academy of Advertising (AAA) to sponsor a student competition among advertising majors. A booklet of regional and national winning campaigns (addressing such problems as drug abuse) was published and newspapers ran the ads of national winners each year. Some faculty used the competition for a newspaper exercise in advertising and strategy and creative classes. The competition ran from 1986 to 1996 and ended when INAME was absorbed into the newly formed Newspaper Association of America (NAA).

The advertising campaigns course at Texas Tech University forms partnerships with local businesses to enhance the student learning experience and serve the community. Students form agencies and compete for a client's account. Clients are selected on the basis of uniqueness of the business, communication problem to be addressed, and nature of the challenge to the student when addressing the communication problem.

The resulting campaign book, included in the students' portfolios, is used during job interviews. Campaigns-class students have reported that more clients and communication problems engendered relatively longer job interviews. In general, longer interviews tend to lead to a greater potential of a job offer. Clearly, finding interesting clients has become a critically important activity to ensure the success of this service-learning approach.

The team aspect of the course is as important as the course material. Representative of operating procedures of the advertising industry, group work provides what Wofford has identified as "the skills which make a good citizen and productive worker: teamwork, initiative, individual responsibility, and problem-solving" (1997, p. 4). The team aspect of the course is additionally emphasized by including a peer evaluation component in the grade structure, based on a student-generated scale of important aspects in being a team player.

The opportunity to merge the academic curriculum and public service came together in the Spring 1997 term with the selection of Petsmart, a national chain of pet supply stores. Selecting the local Petsmart retailer as the client for the advertising campaigns class presented an excellent opportunity for students to apply their training and skills to the solution of a public problem. While the welfare of pets may pale in importance when compared to other issues affecting U.S. society, it is costly for cities that must use tax

dollars to maintain control and housing facilities. Community service is an explicit goal addressed in the mission statement of Petsmart, which strives "to be a good citizen and to add overall value to the community." Wofford (1997) stresses the importance of having students apply the lessons they have learned to critical issues that affect communities. Thus, the combination of this particular client with this particular class seemed a win-win situation for all: students, client, and cause.

This pet store chain is somewhat unusual in that it doesn't sell cats and dogs; instead, customers purchase pet supplies and small animals, fish, and reptiles. However, at each local operation, Petsmart collaborates with animal shelters and veterinarians to offer its services as an adoption agency. The store conducts adoption parties on the weekends. Petsmart also sponsors national campaigns and charitable organizations to assist in the spaying and neutering of animals in an effort to reduce the number of animals at community shelters across the United States.

The idea of using a client with relevant public-service aspects was problematic; few public-service clients possess the substantial funding required for planned media buys, which can include advertisements in newspapers and on broadcast and cable channels. Thus, the desire to integrate public service into the curriculum was likewise problematic, as an exercise that omits the media component would shortchange the students' educational experience. Given the retail nature of Petsmart, an adequate budget for media was present.

The course followed the usual class procedure. After obtaining consent from the national headquarters to act as the class client, the local store manager attended the class and held a client briefing at which the agency charge (task) was given. Students were aware of the client identity in advance and were prepared to ask pertinent questions at the client briefing.

The students, as a class, then executed a primary research effort consisting of a telephone survey of five-hundred local residents. After analyzing the findings, they prepared a one-year advertising/marketing campaign. Four teams of student agencies prepared a sixty-page campaign book, gave a twenty-minute multimedia presentation, and underwent a ten-minute question-and-answer session with a panel of judges, composed of the Petsmart manager, local media executives, and local advertising agency personnel.

### **Results: The Campaigns**

Student agencies were successful in bringing a public service aspect to all of the campaigns, urging the client to continue Petsmart's work on animal adoption, spaying/neutering clinics, and funding drives to pay for care and feeding of lost and stranded animals. Campaign ideas also centered on outreach to the community on the client's behalf. Some of the campaign concepts created by students included:

- Adoption Fee Rebates, in which twenty-five percent of the adoption fee would be returned to the adopter as a rebate to encourage the adoption of pets scheduled for euthanasia.
- Cutest Pet Contests, in which children could enter their pets and, in return, receive free information on the responsibility of caring and feeding for a pet.
- A "Save Our Pets" and "Protect Our Animals" bumper-sticker campaign, calling attention to pet overpopulation in the local community and action needed to resolve the problem.
- Weekly sponsoring of a photograph for the local newspaper of an animal at a local center that was available for adoption.
- Special campaigns urging adoption by senior citizens, based on research showing that pet ownership can be of medical assistance in lowering blood pressure, alleviating loneliness, deterring suicide, etc.
- Park Day, in which the client sponsored a day of fun and prizes for children at local city parks. Again, the central theme of the activities was to educate young people on the importance of properly caring for a pet, including providing security so the pet would not become lost and eventually homeless.
- Free textbook covers to elementary school children. The materials would tell the story of millions of dogs and cats destroyed ("put to sleep") every year and how it could be stopped.
- Support for book drives for local schools and libraries. The client's retail location would be the drop point for people who wished to donate books or monies for the effort.
- In-store displays about animal abuse, euthanasia, and the method in which saltwater fish are trapped for sale (using dynamite or cyanide procedures which stun the fish).

The local manager used several of the materials created by the students in the annual Save-A-Pet campaign, nationally sponsored by Petsmart. Posters urging customers to contribute to the charity were based on student materials, including register cards asking for customers to donate their change to the cause. Two poignant examples:

- Artwork showing a Collie dog, birthday hat on head and whistle/blower in mouth, asking: "Will I live to see my next birthday?"
- A Dalmatian puppy, looking out from inside a fence (shaded to resemble jail bars) with the headline: "Did I do something wrong?"

Both register cards pointed out how dogs and cats were destroyed by the millions each year in cities that could not afford to maintain them. The manager of the store reported the cards generated much comment (and donations) by the public.

Furthermore, the Dalmation theme was later used by the client in a campaign to discourage the practice of dumping animals in rural areas. The original artwork and headline were used; added was a

poem by Charles Dickens about the loyalty of a dog. The card was then distributed to urge people to use local shelters and adoption agencies instead of leaving animals on the side of the road.

### **Results: The Students**

Class members held informal reflection sessions with the instructor at the conclusion of the course. Most reported they had not previously considered the importance of the issue to the community and their responsibility as citizens to assist. Many reported they were pleased at the aspect of merging their upcoming career fields with social responsibility and were looking forward to the opportunity to bring their talents to the issue, clearly in line with Rifkin's assertion that service learning "engenders a sense of personal responsibility and accountability, fosters self esteem and leadership, and most of all, allows the feeling of empathy to grow and flourish"(1997, p. 17).

Student comments in the post-review session indicated their acknowledgment that the advertising industry wasn't just about dollars, but giving back. Ramaley (1997; citing Komives 1996) points out that education "improves well-being and 'enhances the reasoning and problem-solving capacities of the citizenry.'" Evidence of this was clearly seen from students' reactions to the exercise.

Some students reported to the instructor that subsequent interviews were longer in duration than others they had experienced. Interviewers discussed the students' ad campaigns and congratulated them on "giving back to their community."

In an effort to document student reflection on the exercise, the instructor consulted standardized teacher evaluations completed by students. While not specifically addressing the public service component of the class, evaluations were positive:

- Great class!
- Fun
- I loved every minute of it despite my poor grade in it.

### **Results: Instructor**

Instructors in any discipline can learn a great deal from a service-learning exercise. The experience not only reminds faculty of the importance of including public service in the curriculum, but of the crying need of many organizations for such assistance. Rifkin (1997) points out there are more than 1,400,000 non-profit organizations in the United States whose primary goal is to create social capital.

For-profit businesses have become better citizens as well; one reason for the growth of public relations in the last decade has been the acknowledgment of social responsibility taking on an ever-increasing role in corporate-communication programs. Last year, 298 advertising and public relations degree programs graduated 12,439 students while showing an enrollment of 40,719 (Ross & Johnson

1999). Service-learning activities would show the value of community service to this next generation of communicators. In general, skills and experience which result from service learning, Rifkin points out, will be in higher demand in the information age (in Wofford, 1997).

Several semesters later, the results of the Petsmart campaign encouraged the instructor to use the local newspaper as the client, with an emphasis on encouraging young people to read and subscribers to donate to the Newspaper in Education program.

University cities rely strongly on local support from the community, and such activities would be a high-profile way of showing the university appreciation and maintaining citizenship in the community.

### Limitations/Conclusions

A collaboration with one client, a for-profit enterprise engaged in public service, provided limited data with which to analyze the use of service learning in an advertising curricula. In addition, greater reflection studies must be conducted to assess the student reactions to these exercises. Finally, better assessment measures are needed in order to obtain valid reflections from clients and faculty.

However, while this study produced anecdotal evidence, it stands as evidence of a successful marriage of public service and advertising/public relations curricula. Zlotkowski (1997) calls for service learning to rest at the intersection of traditional-active learning and private-public axis. Combining service learning to the communication curricula is one method of accomplishing this goal.



### Author's Note

*Based on the success of this experience, a proposal has been made to the Texas attorney general to act as the client in the Fall 2000 course, with the specific agency charge of building a public service campaign for a social issue of the AG's choosing. Suggested topics include Deadbeat Dads, school crossing/school bus safety, childhood vaccinations, voter registration/turnout, and drunk driving. A key point of the proposal is that the attorney general attend the presentations and select the winning agency, thus giving a higher profile to the students' efforts and the social issue in general.*

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### About the Author

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