Submitted to the Academy of Marketing Conference
7-9 July 2015, University of Limerick, Ireland

Delivering Marketing Magic: Marketing simulations in practice

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Introduction

Examination of the marketplace shows that there are a variety of marketing simulations available. These simulations can be used to introduce students to marketing, facilitate the student's ability to create a strategic marketing plan, or enable them to understand and practice more specialist aspects of the marketing process (Vos, 2014). Simulations provide students with the opportunity to demonstrate their understanding of marketing, to apply that understanding to a 'live' situation and to develop core transferable skills (e.g. working in teams, working to deadline, decision making, presentation skills). Some studies attempt to prove that participation in marketing simulations advantage students in their academic careers (Brennan and Vos, 2013), whilst others propose that students who have successfully engaged with marketing simulations will have more fruitful careers (Wolfe and Roberts, 1993).

Given the glowing accolade that such simulations receive what are the challenges that academics face when delivering such an experience? The aim of this project is to investigate the efficacy of using marketing simulations and to gain insight into how students engage with them. By using a case study method, results will gain a rich data and show the alternative perspective of both staff and student in the classroom. Finally, the as a developmental piece, this research will make early recommendations for future practice.

Literature Review

Marketing Simulations: An historical overview of use

Some contend that business games (strategic board and war games) have been used for 5000 years (Hodgetts, 1970; Wolfe, 1993). However, this paper is focused on the use of such games within a University context. Faria, Hutchinson, Wellington and Gold (2009) refer to the first use of a business simulation taking place as early as 1932 in Europe and 1955 in North America, with the first use of such a game in a University taking place in 1957. Early games were not computerised and were hand scored. Faria et al (2009) trace the development of such games as becoming computerised (on a mainframe) between the 1960s and 1980s with them becoming PC based from the mid 1980s and internet based from the late 1990s. Today, most simulations are online and colleagues and students can access them from their PCs, laptops and most recently tablets and mobile telephones (Faria et al. 2009; Vos, 2014). Although meaningful statistics are not available in the UK, Faria has regularly analysed the use of marketing simulations among university business school teachers in North America (Faria, 1998; Faria and Wellington, 2004; Faria et al. 2009). Faria and Wellington (2004) state that of 1,085 respondents 47.7% are using or had used business simulations. This number rises to 64.1% when the data looks at marketing users (Faria, 2006).

Marketing Simulations: Success or (lasting) novelty?

Measuring the success of a marketing simulation is problematic. What is to be used as the yardstick of this success? Is it successful engagement in class? High marks in summative assessments? Should the future career of the student be examined? The literature has examined each of these facets to some degree.

As Vos (2014:76) posits 'instructors are seeking to optimise student learning and skill development within a subject area.' However, it is very difficult to measure understanding because one cannot separate one group from another as a control group within a live environment due to ethical reasons (we are educating these students after all!) Nor can one assure like for like comparison across individuals. Nevertheless a number of studies have

demonstrated a relationship between simulations and test results (Brennan and Vos, 2013; Faria and Whiteley, 1990; Whiteley and Faria, 1990). However, as Vos (2014) posits, there are more critics of such studies than the studies themselves. A second group of studies have looked beyond university to consider the effect of simulation on career success. Studies by Teach and Govahi (1988), Wolfe and Roberts (1993) and Cronan and Douglas (2012) each report that students who had participated in business and marketing simulations at university have more fruitful careers as a consequence. A fourth pocket of research has used different measures, for example, positivity towards the simulation (summarised by Anderson and Lawton, 2009), whilst a fifth group has looked towards student engagement and motivation to learn (Garris, Ahlers & Driskell, 2002; Gee, 2003; Krishen, 2013; Squire, 2003).

The focus of this paper lies in the final group of studies, those which have analysed successful engagement with learning. Vos (2014) refers to Gibbs (2010:33) who summarises 'the crucial variable is student engagement and it has proved possible to identify the… variables involved in engaging students, such as the level of academic challenge, the extent of active and collaborative learning… the extent and quality of student-faculty interaction.' There is an array of literature which makes a connection between positive student engagement, positive motivation to study from simulation participation and perceptions of learning (for a comprehensive summary, see Vos, 2014.)

Problems and challenges of implementation

However, in spite of the successes reported in the above literature, a further body of studies reflect on the challenges faced by those academics who chose to use a marketing simulation. These challenges mirror those faced by any module using an active or experiential learning approach and such issues as students feeling overwhelmed and confused by the activity (Petranek, 2000). Students also find team work problematic (Faria et al, 2009), particularly if their group is not very cohesive (Anderson, 2005). Finally, students need an active and confident instructor to guide them through the process (Vos, 2014).

This review concludes that, even if it is difficult to measure, simulations have reported positive results for students in terms of motivation, engagement and output (summative assessment results). Further, that there are positive results in terms of graduate career success. However, there are problems and challenges facing the delivery team, not least because the literature generally focuses on the performance outcome of the student and does not measure this alongside effective delivery.

Method

This research uses a case study method to provide insight into the implementation of a marketing simulation game and the effects upon both staff (in delivering the module) and students (in terms of engagement with study). The case study group comprises a group of 250+ first year undergraduate students at a business school in a Russell Group university. Through the utilisation of twice yearly student feedback questionnaires as a starting point, followed by focus groups and semi-structured interviews a rich data will be gathered.

Findings and Discussion

The early findings of the study demonstrate that there are a number of issues at operational level, which needs to be considered before implementing a marketing simulation. These include the formation of teams, delivery of the simulation and assessment.

Formation of teams

The group of students were asked to self-select. For some students, this proved very popular, and they quickly formed into groups. Others formed into pairs and joined with unknown colleagues. Few queried this method, however, those students who did not have friends to join a team and joined as a single unit were most likely to be critical of this system. No complaints were received from pairs or self-formed teams. Those that did complete said that their group was not cohesive and communication was poor. This would support the findings of Anderson (2005) who concludes that the most successful teams are those which are most cohesive from the outset and recommends that teachers introduce team building and provide early instruction regarding working in groups.

Assessment

The second session saw a significant drop in numbers of students attending. Feedback from students indicated that they had prioritised their time elsewhere, because there was no summative assessment for the simulation. Students were unable to make the link between the experiential learning aspect of the simulation and the summative assessment that would take place in the end of year. The literature (Brennan and Vos, 2013) proposes that students who have participated in simulations perform better in tests than those who don't. Other studies conclude that they will perform better in their future careers (Wolfe and Roberts, 1993). Unfortunately, students were unable to make the link between simulation participation and future success.

Delivery: inside or outside the classroom

The first two sessions for the simulation were delivered inside the classroom. However, there was a great deal of resistance by some student groups. One member of the delivery team reflected that at the second session a group asked three times if they could leave the classroom and work in their own time. This group were so insistent that they were comfortable with working with the package that the team member let the group go. Early simulations were lab based and did not face these challenges (Faria et al. 2009). More modern simulations, which can be accessed anywhere will need to consider how to integrate the simulation in to the programme.

Conclusions

This study is currently in an early stage of data collection. However, the preliminary findings lead to recommendations for the implementation of simulations at operational level. The findings suggest that students who are able to form teams in friendship groups engage more fully with the process. The first recommendation is to give greater consideration to the formation of teams, including instruction on team conduct prior to game commencement and some early team building exercises. Secondly, the findings demonstrate that there are issues regarding engagement and assessment. More research into the literature is required here but early recommendation would be to include summative assessment that directly links to the simulation. Students do not make the leap between the simulation and improved performance in end of year exams. Finally, this paper concludes that in light of the fact that these simulations can be accessed at any location, further consideration needs to be made regarding the delivery and participation in the game. This is particularly important when considering experiential learning, integration of flipped classroom activities and the efficacy of the marketing simulation in smaller and/or larger cohorts.

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