
Integrating the Marketing Research and Marketing Strategy Courses

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While a natural connection between marketing research and marketing strategy exists, these courses are generally taught as separate, standalone subjects. Therefore, students view them as each being its own silo of specific content. While students learn marketing research content, they don't understand its direct connection to marketing strategy. Furthermore, students often do not gain a clear understanding of the critical role of research in informing marketing decisions. We report on an integration of the Marketing Research and Marketing Strategy courses. Qualitative and quantitative data are given showing that the integration enhanced learning outcomes and that students viewed the integration favorably.

Keywords: Integration, Marketing Research, Marketing Strategy, Capstone Project

Disciplines of Interest: Marketing

INTRODUCTION

Marketing Research is required in most marketing curricula since research informs marketing decisions. However, as noted in the literature and as instructors of research have observed, many students approach the research course with dread [Bridges, 1999] equating it to “statistics” and attempting simply to memorize, regurgitate, and once the course is over, forget the material [Dobni and Links, 2008]. Instructors may also find that a single term is too short for students to both learn marketing research and to complete a meaningful project that includes secondary and primary research. As a result, students are not prepared to effectively conduct research.

Most marketing curricula include a capstone course where students synthesize concepts from their marketing courses [Crittenden and Crittenden, 2006; Metcalf, 2010; Haas and Wotruba, 1990]. Often, this course is based around an experiential learning project that can build competency and enhance self-efficacy for tasks students might perform in entry level positions [Pollack and Lilly, 2008; Richter and Schmidt, 2008]. In our case, students prepare a marketing plan, an approach of demonstrated value [Bove and Davies, 2009; Elam and Spotts, 2004; Razzouk et al., 2003].

We report here on our experience in integrating the required Marketing Research and Marketing Strategy courses. Over two semesters, student teams produce for a client a comprehensive marketing research report that informs a marketing plan. We report how we integrated the classes, the success of the exercise, and lessons learned, including suggestions for others.

Integration Goals

By integrating the courses, we set out to eliminate overlap, improve the quality of both the research report and marketing plan, and place research in the proper context for students (i.e., demonstrate that research is more than statistics).

Eliminate Overlap

Overlap was eliminated because prior to the integration of the courses students produced a research report for one client in research and another research study in strategy to guide the marketing plan. Now students produce one research report for one client, not two. This now leads to the second goal, improved quality.

Improved Quality

With the integration, students produce a higher quality, more in-depth research report which leads to an improved marketing plan. Prior to our integration, research students often did some secondary research; now they produce an in-depth, detailed secondary research report. This secondary research now informs their qualitative research. Before, they conducted a focus group but did not do a detailed content analysis. Now, informed by the secondary research, they conduct focus groups or interviews and perform a quality content analysis. Before, given the lack of time, students could not validate the qualitative research by conducting quantitative research. Now they do. Students now experience firsthand the difficulties of creating a survey that is clear, concise, and provides the data necessary for statistical analysis. Data analysis now goes beyond simple descriptive statistics to include testing of their research model using SPSS software. Finally, students who feel that once they have collected their data they are “more or less finished” learn not only that data analysis is challenging, but that one of the most difficult tasks in market research is writing a clear, concise, and accurate research report that succinctly presents the findings and implications.

This research report then provides the backbone to guide the creation of a marketing plan built around facts, not their opinion. Before the integration, the fifteen-week term did not allow time for a detailed and complete research report in the Marketing Strategy class to guide the marketing plan. Typically, students in Marketing Strategy would rely on a haphazard secondary research effort, perhaps a few interviews, and maybe a focus group that was not well analyzed or an

Table 1. Objectives of Marketing Research and Marketing Strategy Integration

Objectives for the Marketing Research and Marketing Strategy Students	
1	Further their understanding and interest of marketing.
2	Enable them to become good marketing planners.
3	Foster their critical thinking skills.
4	Acquire an integrated understanding of marketing.
5	Learn to use appropriate tools of analysis.
6	Develop the ability to effectively obtain, organize, and communicate information.
7	Acquire the ability to interact effectively and professionally with people of varied backgrounds, abilities, and values.

ill-informed survey that was poorly designed and administered. Analysis did not go beyond descriptive statistics. Generally, the research component was built more off assumptions and the team's opinions than defensible research findings. Given the time limitations, the instructor could not demand both a quality research report and marketing plan in one semester. Following the integration effort, students now have a high quality research report to guide their marketing plan and learn that, by definition, their marketing plan can be no better than their research report.

Students that produce an inadequate research report cannot simply take their grade in research and start over again in the strategy class. If their research report was inadequate, they must conduct additional research to provide the information needed for the marketing plan in strategy. The integration of research and strategy stands in sharp contrast to almost every other class they have taken where students "take their grade and move on" and prepares them for the realities of the "real world." Indeed, students typically discover the iterative nature of research and planning, where even teams that produced high quality research reports must conduct additional research to justify recommendations that emerge as they craft their marketing plan.

Place Research in Its Proper Context

We wanted students to understand that research is more than statistics, that research is simply asking and answering the question why. We wanted to overcome the "memorize and forget it" attitude many of our students had for research by showing how good information is a prerequisite for good marketing decisions. Table 1 provides the objectives we had for the integration of Marketing Research and Strategy. These objectives were also stated on our course syllabi.

Integration of Marketing Research and Strategy

Our integration is centered on a live case which taps the benefits of active and experiential learning [Bove and Davies, 2009; Dommeyer, 1986; Graeff, 1997; Kolb, Boyatzis, and Mainemelis, 2001; Hamer, 2000; Humphreys, 1981; Lovelace et al., 2010; Maher and Hughner, 2005; Smith and Van Doren, 2004] and which has been established as an effective pedagogical tool [Karns, 2005; Kennedy, Lawton, and Walker, 2001]. We use local businesses such as retail stores and professional practices, university units (e.g., housing, parking, and faculty staff club), nonprofits (e.g. school lunch program, community centers), university intellectual property, and proposed ventures as clients.

The instructors jointly determine projects and work with the clients throughout both semesters. The instructors are listed on both syllabi, which they jointly develop, including the project guidelines. The instructors teach in both classes and review and grade all projects, jointly deciding the student's final grade in both classes.

Detailed syllabus and project guidelines can be provided by contacting the authors.

In the first week of the Marketing Research course, students self-select into teams of about five members. The client projects are then presented. Students may also propose their own projects. Both instructors are present for the introduction of the projects. In week two of the research class, the strategy instructor introduces the process of marketing planning to place marketing research into the broader context of the marketing plan, and students contact and meet with their client organization. Clients outline their marketing challenges, providing student teams with information they have already gathered. Clients and students then meet throughout the next thirty weeks, on average about once every two weeks, with students sharing what information they have gathered and, later in the strategy class, their emerging recommendations. Other material is also brought forward into the research class and taught by the strategy instructor, such as internal and external scanning, the SWOT analysis, and market segmentation, targeting, and positioning. The marketing research material is then introduced in week three by the research instructor, using the case organizations as examples.

The initial focus of research concerns the development of the research question and objectives, which are predicated on client needs and secondary research information that has been collected by the students.

The first deliverable is a scope-of-work document due during the seventh week of research. The scope-of-work includes the research problem statement and objectives, secondary research reported in the content of internal and external scanning, a proposed methodology to conduct primary research, and a statement of probable limitations that students may encounter. The scope-of-work is worth 9 percent of their final grade in the research class.

After the scope-of-work is graded by both instructors, they jointly debrief the teams. Students begin to work on their proposed research while the balance of the

research material is covered. The type of primary research conducted by student teams is highly dependent on the nature of their project and research question with teams using a variety of qualitative and quantitative techniques.

The final deliverable is a preliminary research report which is 27 percent of the student's final grade. Student teams will generally have collected substantial primary data, but they have not yet analyzed or fully interpreted their results. Again, both instructors grade the preliminary research report and jointly decide grades.

The Marketing Strategy course begins with a review of the projects and team reorganization if necessary. Typically, the composition of teams does not change substantially. However, some students that are nonmarketing majors take the research but not the strategy class. Other students go on exchange or internships between the research and strategy class. While somewhat disruptive, this restructuring also affords an opportunity for students to relate to the real world where teams often form and reform as members are promoted, new employees are hired, and others leave the organization or unit. In addition, because the number of students enrolling in the Marketing Strategy course is reduced by about twenty percent, a reduction in the number of projects proceeding to the second semester sometimes occurs. The reduction in projects is advantageous since some fail to pass the market assessment evaluation based on the research.

The first week of strategy has an in-depth review of the process of creating a marketing plan, building on the introduction presented in the research class. The final research report is due in the fourth week and is worth 20 percent of the student's strategy grade. In following sessions, the major elements of the marketing plan, including a review of SWOT, product, pricing, place, promotion strategy, relationship marketing, implementation, evaluation, and control, are covered with students presenting to the class. A draft of the marketing plan is due after twelve weeks, with the final marketing plan, which is worth 30 percent of the student's grade, due at the end of the semester. Both instructors review and jointly grade the final marketing plan. Students are expected to cite their research report, which is included in the appendix. At this time, students present to their clients.

In summary, students produce four major projects across the two semesters for the same client. In research, they produce the Scope-of-Work and the Preliminary Research Report. In strategy, they produce the Final Research Report and the Marketing plan. Both instructors jointly review and debrief these projects, and in general, the same students prepare all four deliverables.

METHODOLOGY

Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected to assess students' perceptions of the integration of Marketing Research and Marketing Strategy and whether our objectives were met. We report first on the qualitative research, followed by our quantitative assessment.

Qualitative Analysis

Two student focus groups were conducted with strategy students during the penultimate week of classes and one week before the final marketing plan was due. The focus groups were approximately one hour in length and were conducted by a student-managed research agency within the college. A student moderator was used to ensure participant confidentiality and to boost student candor. Anonymity was guaranteed. Participants received extra credit worth about 0.7 percent of the total points in the class.

The integration began with the Fall 2009 research class, with the first cohort completing Marketing Strategy in Spring 2010. Students in the third cohort, the Spring 2011 strategy class, participated in the focus groups, and most were graduating seniors. The focus groups comprised 26 students for a 53 percent participation rate. Questions were written by the instructors to assess achievement of learning goals. The sessions were videotaped; the instructors were provided only the session transcripts with students identified by code (e.g., male 1, female 2).

The session data were analyzed using the guidelines of Lincoln and Guba's [1985] categorizing process, which involves raters "sorting units into provisional categories on the basis of look-alike characteristics." Working independently, the two instructors and the student moderator read and re-read the transcripts; identified recurring themes, ideas, and thoughts; which were grouped into categories. In the following discussion, quotes are presented that illustrate recurring themes. Some minor editing was done to improve readability and clarity.

Student Perceptions of the Benefits of the Integration

Students viewed the integration of the Marketing Research and Marketing Strategy courses positively and unanimously agreed that it should be continued. Moreover, students said they would choose an integrated over a nonintegrated Marketing Research and Marketing Strategy course curricula if given a choice.

It's nice to see it {the project} from the start to the finish, everything that is required to make it happen. (Female 3/FG1)

It's great for your resume, saying you started and finished {this project}. (male 3/FG1)

Students appreciated the opportunity to make necessary corrections and to learn from their mistakes.

If you don't complete one part of it you have to go back. For instance, my team didn't do enough research and we had to go back and fix it. (Female 8/FG1)

You learn from the failures. (Female 6/FG1)

Perceptions of Research after the Integration

Students reported an appreciation for research that indicated they valued the class and had moved beyond a “learn it and forget it” attitude.

I think that a lot of the stuff we learn in {the Marketing Research} class, we are getting to the point where we are going to use it, and I think that especially for us we found that going into strategy we did use it. I remember going back into the (research) professor’s office and asking him about the Pearson correlation and you know it’s actually stuff we used for our project. It wasn’t a textbook learning thing. It’s a real world application. (Female 1/FG2)

And as far as the projects go, at least with our client, it validated what we were doing. We weren’t shooting random numbers at her and we could actually show her this is what we did and it validated what we did. (Male 1/FG2)

Without exception, the students believed that working with SPSS was helpful. Before, the integration students did not have the opportunity to analyze data they had collected while now this analysis is done in the first three weeks of the strategy class.

I like the hands on work with SPSS. I think that was really helpful. Actually doing it and learning not just {from} the textbook, looking at data, was helpful. (Female 1/FG2)

The cool thing about Research was we were introduced to SPSS program. Something . . . to add to your resume. (Male 1/FG1)

Other students indicated how valuable it was not to just learn about, but to construct and administer a survey, learning through experience just how difficult it is to construct survey questions and obtain the information needed.

Definitely the different types and ways to ask questions, there are a lot of little tweaks. I know for our group, we’d go in and he {instructor} would be “what does this mean?” Even after meeting with him multiple times on our survey, we asked this question in the wrong way - and so just learning through that process, how to structure the question to get the results that you wanted was definitely useful. (Female 1/FG2)

A goal of the integration was to address the dread that students have for research by putting the material into a context where students saw its value. Students were asked about their perceptions of research before the term and after it. Before the term, students heard these statements:

You hear a lot of scary stories. I mean a lot of people have that “prepare, be prepared,” it’s difficult. (Female 3/FG1)
I heard it was really hard. (Female 2/FG2)
I thought it was going to be a glorified statistics class. (Male 4/FG2)

But after the term was over, students had very different opinions:

It was the most applicable marketing class I have ever taken. (Female 4/FG2)
It was a hard but fair class. It was very fair. It wasn’t something you could get through if you didn’t try. (Male 1/FG2)

Continuity and Team Reformation

We are unable to require that students enroll in the Marketing Strategy course immediately upon the completion of the Marketing Research course (i.e., the following semester). Nor can we require that students stay in the same teams from one course to the next. Thus, some teams are reformed at the beginning of the strategy course, while other teams continue with the project they were engaged with in research. Most teams did not have an issue.

I had to switch teams, but had the same project. I went from the morning to the afternoon section. The research wasn’t exactly different, but there was a different style in the papers. But it was nice to be able to talk about the same things; it was a pretty smooth transition, even though it wasn’t the original team I was working with. (Female 3/FG1)

Quantitative Measures

To supplement the qualitative data, we collected quantitative measures to assess the degree to which we achieved our objectives. All measures were on a 5 point Likert scale, ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5). Table 2 presents student evaluations for our objectives given in Table 1 and other general student perceptions that were collected at the end of the thirty-week integrative exercise. Data are presented for all five cohorts, with responses from 149 of 165 students enrolled in the two course sequence (90.3 percent response rate).

The integration exercise was initiated in the 2009-10 academic year. Overall, the student evaluations show the learning curve associated with the integration, with generally lower evaluation for the first cohort and higher, and generally, steady evaluations for all future cohorts.

Table 2. Assessment Data for Integration of Marketing Research and Marketing Strategy

Term	Spring 2010	Fall 2010	Spring 2011	Fall 2011	Spring 2012	Fall 2012
Number of Respondents	38/46	15/16	45/49	15/15	36/39	22/22
Response Rate	82.6%	93.8	91.8%	100%	92.3%	100%
Cohort GPA in Marketing Strategy	3.20	3.56	3.29	3.07	2.95	2.95
Mean/Standard Deviation						
Measures of Student Perceptions of Performance Against Objectives						
Objective 1 - The course furthered my understanding of, and interest in marketing.	3.81/1.18	4.53/.64	4.29/.73	4.13/.74	4.17/1.08	4.48/.75
Objective 2 - The course enabled me to become a good marketing planner.	3.76/1.02	4.53/.64	3.91/.73	3.93/.80	4.00/.72	4.24/.62
Objective 3 - This class fostered my critical thinking skills.	3.71/.84	4.20/.68	4.04/77	4.00/.65	4.06/.63	4.43/.60
Objective 4 - I acquired an integrated understanding of marketing in this class.	3.63/.82	4.27/.70	4.11/.78	4.33/.72	4.22/.76	4.23/.70
Objective 5 - I learned to use appropriate tools of analysis to identify and address problems or opportunities.	3.58/.79	4.47/.64	3.98/81	4.00/.76	3.83/81	4.10/.77
Objective 6 - I developed the ability to effectively obtain, organize, and communicate information.	3.76/.82	4.60/.51	4.04/.77	4.00/.53	3.97/.77	4.33/.66
Objective 7 - I acquired the ability to interact effectively and professionally with people of varied backgrounds, abilities, and values.	3.66/.96	4.60/.63	4.16/.71	3.87/.83	3.92/.77	4.19/.75

Table 2. Assessment Data for Integration of Marketing Research and Marketing Strategy (continued)

Term	General Measures and Student Perceptions							
	Spring 2010	Fall 2010	Spring 2011	Fall 2011	Spring 2012	Fall 2012		
On the whole, this is a good course.	3.79/1.07	4.60/.51	4.42/.69	4.13/.64	4.31/.62	4.57/.50		
The amount of work and/or reading is appropriate for the course credit hours.	3.74/1.11	4.60/.51	4.09/.97	3.73/.96	3.64/1.22	4.10/.94		
Focusing the class primarily on the marketing plan was a good approach.	3.82/1.18	4.47/.99	4.27/.86	4.27/.70	4.22/.64	4.00/1.18		
I got bored focusing on the marketing plan and wish there had been other elements to the class.	2.95/1.14	2.47/1.13	2.51/.99	3.00/1.25	2.94/1.09	2.86/1.15		
The integration of Research and Marketing Strategy was a positive learning experience.	3.66/1.17	4.67/.49	4.27/.99	3.60/.91	4.17/.74	3.70/1.26		
The in class work days were valuable.	4.21/.91	4.40/.74	4.67/.56	4.20/1.08	4.08/.97	4.90/.30		

All measures are on a 5 point Likert, ranging from Strongly Agree (5) to Strongly Disagree (1).

The evaluations show that we have achieved our objectives, adding support to the qualitative analysis. Students report that they acquired an integrated understanding of marketing with scores ranging from 4.33 to 4.11 (on a five-point Likert) for the last four cohorts. Likewise, students generally viewed the integration of the research and strategy course favorably and responded positively to focusing on a marketing plan. Speaking to the greater focus on producing a high quality research report to guide the marketing plan, students indicated that they learned to use appropriate tools of analysis to identify and address problems or opportunities. It is worth noting that the cohort GPA has ranged from a high of 3.56 in the Fall of 2010 to a low of 2.95 in the Spring of 2012. For a senior capstone class of graduating seniors, these GPA's are appropriate. Furthermore, the student evaluations do not show any clear and obvious relation to class GPA arguing for greater confidence in the data as some argue that student grades can influence student evaluations.

Students that start the research class in August (fall semester) produce a complete marketing plan by May (end of spring semester). Students that start the research class in January (spring semester) produce a complete marketing plan by December (end of fall semester). We make it clear to clients the timeline and that, from the start of the process to finish, nine to eleven months will be involved. Having a summer break between the spring start and fall finish initially caused us some concern. However, the focus group data did not reveal any student frustration with the summer break interrupting the process. Furthermore, the quantitative data do not show that evaluations are lower for the fall term (spring start students). Therefore, the long summer layoff does not seem to present any significant problems.

Benefits and Challenges

To make integration a success, instructors must have the support of their administration [Athaide and Desai, 2005]. Teaching in an integrative fashion is intense and demanding of instructor time. For instance, additional time is required in our integrative course format for team mentoring, debriefs, developing client relations, and prospecting for new projects for the next cohort. We estimate that we increase the workload of each class by at least 20 percent due to meeting together to develop projects and by, in essence, doubling our project grading and team debriefs. Ideally, instructors would sit in each other's courses, but in the absence of course releases, this was not possible in our situation.

The integration exercise is frequently cited as an example of best practice in outreach and engagement by not just our department head and dean, but the university provost. Lastly, outreach work with internal and external stakeholders that previously would have been an overload and likely declined is now effectively used in the integrated classes.

Our university is a residential campus, and our classes are composed almost entirely of full time, traditional undergraduate students. We believe that univer-

sities with a nontraditional part-time student body would find the integration outlined here a challenge. This is particularly true given that prerequisite of research to strategy and the high desirability that students take the courses in sequence would prove challenging for students that work full time.

Finally, while the integration has resulted in increased workload demands for us, just as the students find the integrated classes more rewarding, we do as well. Mentoring the students to produce high quality research reports and marketing plans reconnects us to the practice of marketing. The marketing plans reflect a much richer and fuller understanding of the client's internal, external, and customer environment, with recommendations that are deeper and more practical. We believe that clients are more satisfied, and we have antidotal evidence that many recommendations have been successfully implemented. This, in turn has resulted in very positive support for the college and the university. Referrals for possible student projects have increased, allowing the instructors to be more selective in screening projects and clients. Furthermore, we have the largely intangible, but still significant benefit of seeing our students perform at a significantly higher level. In addition, instructors that teach a live case built around actual client projects become, in essence, consultants who are able to maintain their connection to actual marketing practice. Similar to doing research and publishing, this can be intellectually stimulating, and we find, that we learn more from the projects now, given that the integration provides better research reports and marketing plans. In some cases, the increased rigor of the research reports and marketing plans has provided publishing opportunities. We would have a difficult time eliminating the integration if for no other reason than we would be fundamentally dissatisfied with the reduced quality, depth, and scope of stand-alone research and marketing plans.

LIMITATIONS

Assessment of any pedagogical initiative is critical, yet difficult. Our assessment relies heavily on qualitative and quantitative student self-reports. We believe that the perception of the students as the primary reason for, and benefactor of the integrative exercise, does have considerable merit. Indeed, the voice of the consumer, in this case the student's, is generally given the highest weight in the marketplace, even if the use of student self-reports has specific challenges when evaluating learning outcomes. Karns [2005], while citing direct measures as desirable, laid out many of the challenges involved in collecting such data while presenting a coherent defense for the use of student self-reports.

Many sources of error beyond the control of the researcher dictated the research design implemented here. For instance, both the research and strategy instructors were new to the class; therefore, any comparisons of student performance before and after the integration of the class would be confounded by the change of instructors. There are also inevitable variations in the attitudes of each

student cohort along with other sources of variance, including the specific projects and clients.

Nevertheless, both the qualitative and quantitative data reported here rely on student perceptions. We encourage other instructors adopting an integrated method to collect before and after direct measures of learning outcomes.

CONCLUSION

Students often view their education as a collection of discrete and unrelated classes that lead to a degree. Some courses are endured and then forgotten. The perception shared by many marketing students toward the marketing research course is a classic example where concepts and skills taught are not often synthesized and carried into other marketing courses. Such an attitude by students can turn the most carefully crafted curriculum into little more than piece-meal learning. By integrating the Marketing Research and Strategy class, we have found that even students who do not look forward to the research can obtain a rewarding experience.

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