Chapter 3

The Google Online Marketing Challenge:
A Transnational Comparison of Classroom Learning with Real Clients, Real Money, and Real Advertising Campaigns

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2008, a collaborative partnership between Google and academia launched the Google Online Marketing Challenge (hereinafter Google Challenge), perhaps the world's largest in-class competition for higher education students. In just two years, almost 20,000 students from 58 countries participated in the Google Challenge. The Challenge gives undergraduate and graduate students hands-on experience with the world's fastest growing advertising mechanism, search engine advertising. Funded by Google, students develop an advertising campaign for a small to medium sized enterprise and manage the campaign over three consecutive weeks using the Google AdWords platform. This article explores the Challenge as an innovative pedagogical tool for marketing educators. Based on the experiences of three instructors in Australia, Canada and the United States, this case study discusses the opportunities and challenges of integrating this dynamic problem-based learning approach into the classroom.

BACKGROUND

Google Online Marketing Challenge

The *Google Online Marketing Challenge* is a global business student competition developed by professors in collaboration with Google. Unlike most student competitions with hypothetical scenarios or simulations, the Google Challenge gives students US$200 to work with real businesses, in real-time, to create an online marketing campaign using Google's advertising platform, AdWords (Flaherty et al., 2009).

Review of Experiential Learning

To maintain student interest and create a memorable encounter, instructors increasingly face the challenge of providing innovative and stimulating educational experiences for students (Elam & Spotts, 2004; Matulich, Papp & Haytko, 2008; Ueltschy, 2001). Scholars argue that "(…) the lecture format is not the most effective educational delivery mechanism, particularly in marketing" (Helms, Mayo & Baxter, 2003, p. 18). Instead, active learning methods that empower students to think and learn for themselves are increasingly recommended as an alternative (Johnson, Johnson & Smith, 1991).

Critics often lament that universities provide insufficient real-world experiential learning (Kelley & Gaedeke, 1990; Thomas, 1995). Traditional learning methods such as lectures still seem appropriate in some environments such as large or introductory-level classes, yet students have different learning styles (Karns, 2006; Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Students often prefer experiential learning, through activities such as field trips, case studies, business audits, internships, simulations, competitions, live projects, community-based service learning and student-operated businesses (Andrews, 2007; Doren & Corrigan, 2008; Drea et al., 1997; Govekar and Rishi, 2007; Hamer, 2000; Karns, 2005; Kennedy, Lawton & Walker, 2001; McIntyre, Webb and Hite, 2005).

Experiential learning is a pedagogical approach whereby students experience "a task or set of tasks, and ultimately learn from their actions" (Neale et al., 2009, p. 7). Simpson and Pham (2007) note that such "learning strategies are based on application (using knowledge to solve problems) and analysis" (p. 1). Experiential learning helps grasp the relevance of information from situations encountered (McKeachie, 2002) and transform knowledge into know-how (Katula & Threnhauser, 1999). Many university educators advocate and incorporate real-world experiential learning in various disciplines including marketing related courses such as: marketing (Bobbitt et al., 2000; Drea et al., 1997; Munoz & Huser, 2008), marketing research (Bove & Davies 2009; Bridges, 1999), marketing communications (Luck & Chalmers, 2007), personal selling and purchasing (O'Hara & Shaffer, 1995), services marketing (Gremler et al., 2000), economics (Hawtrey, 2007), and entrepreneurship and retail management (Daly, 2001).

Students perceive experiential methods, particularly real-world projects, as more effective for their learning (Karns, 2005; Navarro, 2008). Relative to traditional lectures, students become more engaged with problem-based/problem-centered teaching (Gilbert & Andrew, 2004). For example, Rosso et al. (2009) report that MBA students demonstrated a high level of comprehension thanks to a search-advertising project in their course.

One way to link marketing theory with 'real-world' application is to involve students in service learning projects or "living cases" (LeClair & Stöttinger, 1999, p. 31), also referred to as *client-sponsored projects* (Humphreys, 1981). *Community-based service learning* programs focus on student involvement in community service within a credit-earning educational experience (Berry & Workman, 2007; Govekar & Rishi, 2007; Petkus, 2000). *Living cases* combine traditional case study elements with a unique real-world business environment in which students learn to

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