

Chapter XII

Business–Plan Anchored E–Commerce Courses at the MBA–Level

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ABSTRACT

The diversity and currency of subjects covered in e-commerce courses at the MBA level present a challenge to educators. In this chapter, we analyze and recapitulate our experience in using the business plan to anchor the e-commerce course to address those challenges. Business plan requirements can link the various subjects together, afford students with a real-life experience learning process, and, with proper curriculum design and course delivery, give students an opportunity to be “reflective practitioners.” Results showed that students’ learning and interests for the e-commerce subjects were high with the business plan requirement.

INTRODUCTION

The introduction and adoption of electronic commerce courses in the MBA curriculum have been a rapid, dynamic, yet volatile process for many universities. From the early days of “jubilation” about anything e-commerce, to the crash and burn of the dotcoms, to the relative stabilization of Internet businesses in recent years, e-commerce courses have undergone dramatic changes in terms of content, teaching orientation, and interest level. But even with the burst of the Internet bubble, the

popularity of e-commerce courses and programs actually grew (Fusilier & Durlabhji, 2003). In less than 10 years, they have become a mainstay in many MBA programs, especially in the MIS or IT track.

However, to successfully offer e-commerce courses at the MBA level poses continuing challenges to educators for several reasons. First, the concept and practice of e-commerce are still new, dynamic, and evolving constantly. Materials are often ill-defined, and topics become out of date quickly. For instance, applications service

provider and independent business-to-business intermediaries, two of the most important Internet applications in 1999, have been reduced to minor topics in the general areas of e-commerce operations. Conversely, popular and important current Internet activities, such as social networking, did not exist in the 1990s boom. Such fluid nature of the course requires instructors to renew, sometimes redo, the course content and coverage from year to year, or as often as every semester.

Second, an e-commerce course covers topics that are often diverse and seemingly unrelated. Based on three widely adopted graduate-level e-commerce textbooks (Awad, 2007; Laudon & Traver, 2007; Turban et al., 2006), the topics range from the technology infrastructure and Website construction, to marketplace structure and economics, to marketing and operations, to various issues regarding security and social impact. It is difficult, if not impossible, to cover all these relevant topics in a semester's time while maintaining a consistent tone for the course. At worst, students come away with a collection of materials without a central theme or integrated idea of what e-commerce really is about. We therefore see many different "flavors" of e-commerce courses—for example, technology or programming-oriented, e-marketing focused, entrepreneurship—often based on the interest and specialty of the instructors.

Last, but not least, MBA students come with a variety of backgrounds, and they take e-commerce courses with differing objectives. Some, for instance, already have strong hands-on knowledge in IT, and they hope to complement that with a more management-orientation e-commerce program. Others, however, are not familiar with the technical side and expect to learn more about e-commerce technology and how they can apply it in business. Offering interdisciplinary choices as motivators to all students and balancing all subjects carefully to satisfy individual preferences become an important task in making an e-commerce course successful.

How does one deliver an e-commerce course that is dynamic and consistently updated? How does one paint the whole picture of e-commerce with those diverse topics as tightly knitted components? Perhaps, more importantly how does one integrate the technology components with all the business subjects to equip the students with real-world applications of e-commerce? There are a number of proposed ways to address these concerns. One approach, arguably passive, is to adapt the lectures, linking them together while citing real-world applications, and supplementing lectures with cases (Hackney, McMaster, & Harris, 2003). While this approach exposes students to critical subject matter, it does not engage them in the process of integrating the materials. Unfortunately, quality e-commerce cases are not that common, and few cover more than one topic adequately. Another approach is to require students to compose a final paper on a practical topic that involves more than one area of e-commerce. This requirement improves their comprehension of the concepts and ability to apply them. Regrettably the impact is limited, because students only engage in the integrated exercise toward the end of the semester, rather than throughout the whole course. Yet, another is to use small business consulting projects as a hands-on exercise in the actual implementation of e-commerce applications. Because of, and limited by, the nature of available small business sites, this approach is best suited for undergraduate e-commerce courses with a technical focus (Tabor, 2005). Finally, a "student-driven" approach is proposed, where students, divided into groups, develop and learn e-commerce materials with the help of tutors based on narratives and tasks issued to them for each section. This seems to be an excellent approach for a graduate-level e-commerce course, provided that the class is large enough and the resources (e.g., the availability of tutors) are available (McBride, 2005).

In this chapter, we discuss a different approach to addressing those challenges, based on

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