

A SOCIAL MEDIA PRACTICUM: AN ACTION-LEARNING APPROACH TO SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING AND ANALYTICS

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To prepare students for the rapidly evolving field of digital marketing, which requires more and more technical skills every year, a social media practicum creates a learning environment in which students can apply marketing principles and become ready for collaborative work in social media marketing and analytics. Using student newspapers as examples, the practicum adopts an action-learning approach to enhance student knowledge and skills in social media. This paper describes the structure, process, and tools that support this practical experience in a marketing course. The extent to which the practicum helps in preparing students is assessed and reported.

THE CHALLENGE

Marketing faculty need to provide effective learning experiences in social media marketing and analytics to prepare students to meet the industry demand for talent. A recent industry survey identified significant shortages of available talent needed to support the hiring demand in areas of marketing that involve social media and analytics, among others (Online Marketing Institute, 2013). Industry advisors to the faculty of the author's institution recommend that preparing students for social media marketing, analytics, and teamwork should take priority in curriculum improvement. Besides social media platforms and tools, students also need an understanding of the process of social media marketing that includes targeting audience, defining and executing strategy, managing contents, tracking metrics, and reporting analytics. Teamwork skills are important because most social media positions require collaboration with a media team or cross-functional team (Altimeter, 2011; Rangan, 2012).

Marketing educators have been creating effective learning experiences to enhance students' social media competency, such as individual or group assignments in networking on LinkedIn (Peterson & Dover, 2014), communicating on Twitter (Rinaldo, Tapp, & Laverie, 2011), marketing on YouTube (Payne, Campbell, Bal, & Piercy, 2011), applying social engagement strategy (Bacile, 2013), and managing

personal brand on social media (Edmiston, 2014). In marketing research, Veeck and Hoger (2014) introduce students to collecting data via social media and monitoring tools.

However, even adopting all these assignments throughout the marketing curriculum would not necessarily provide a cohesive preparation for real-world responsibility in social media marketing. Instead of a collection of assignments, students gain insight into the marketing process through purposeful participation in a meaningful campaign from beginning to end. It is also in this process that students gain an understanding of analytics with which they experience revising initial strategy and adapting principles to specific situations. Furthermore, in a rapidly evolving field such as digital marketing, Kolb's experiential learning skills will be valuable for maintaining professional competency. These skills include the ability to iteratively refine knowledge from new experiences, progressively test ideas in new situations, and continually use feedback to change practices and theories (Kolb, 1984). Simply put, effective preparation of students for social media marketing and analytics needs to take place within a programmatic context that provides opportunities for learning the aforementioned knowledge and skills.

A SOCIAL MEDIA PRACTICUM

A social media practicum is designed to achieve the objective of gaining full experience of teamwork in social media planning, strategy implementation, tools, and analytics management. The idea of a social media practicum is inspired by campus newspapers. Journalism students connect theory and practice by

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applying knowledge and skills to serve a campus need for news. The experience provides an introduction to the practice of their profession. Similarly, by managing live social media campaigns, marketing students serve social networking needs of a campus community in the author's institution, California State University, Fullerton (CSUF). In the first year of implementing the practicum, students focus on promoting the brand of CSUF Marketing on key social media channels, including Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and YouTube. Taking on roles as a social media specialist or campaign manager, participants acquire skills, knowledge, and abilities with high retention rates and improved recall as a result of their immersion in the work experience.

The learning process is structured using an action-learning model of planning, taking action, and reflecting on a real-life challenge (Young, 2010). Working in small teams, participants are empowered to define the task, determine the goal and strategies, and implement their plan to create results. In this social media practicum, participants would repeat going through the process of planning, action, and reflection in adapting their campaigns to Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and YouTube. With faculty guidance, students refine their knowledge and skills after reflecting on the outcomes of their plan and action.

Social Media Campaign for a Target Persona

The teamwork starts with identifying a target segment within the CSUF marketing community and researching the needs of a target persona, which is a constructed fictitious character representative of the target segment. Prospective community members include marketing majors, potential marketing majors, students taking a marketing class, alumni, faculty, and friends of the marketing department at CSUF. In the first year of building the community, most target personas represent various personalities among marketing students. To facilitate their work, each team selects a real person and constructs a persona profile through interviews. Focusing on the "fear, pain, and gain" of the target persona, each team designs an eight-week social media campaign on four channels to serve the identified needs of the persona.

Live campaigns stimulate learning, while the responsibility of serving community needs energizes students (Sessa, London, Pingor, Gullu, & Patel, 2011). Teams have two weeks to define campaign objectives,

formulate strategies, create schedules, and design content. They are given requirements on the number and schedule of posts in each channel and must present precampaign plans to get feedback from the class.

Tools and Technology

Teams are given the following social media management tools, which also go into their final report:

1. a template to construct the target persona;
2. Social Media Guidelines;
3. an Editorial Calendar (a planner in spreadsheet) to record the objective, content, schedule, and performance indicators of each post, among other data;
4. a time log to record actual postings;
5. a record that tracks the results of the performance indicators of each post; and
6. a scorecard of metrics for reporting.

To complete the above records, students learn to use social media management technology such as Hootsuite, which organizes campaigns across Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn (Hootsuite, 2014). Students learn to use industry metrics such as those in Facebook Insights (Facebook, 2014) and YouTube Analytics (YouTube, 2014).

As teamwork is an important aspect of social media management, students are reminded to explore their social style and leadership style in the process. They are offered tools to facilitate teamwork: (a) a self-assessment of four social styles, and (b) a self-assessment of seven leadership styles. Students may identify their personal work style, the strengths of that style, the area where they can improve, and how to best work with others who have different work styles.

Reflective Learning

Students conduct three areas of reflective activities: professional, pedagogical, and developmental (Ryan & Ryan, 2013). During the campaign, participants continually monitor and interpret analytics to revise, adapt, and adjust their campaign as professionals would. After eight weeks of running their campaign, each team completes a highly structured report that requires them to reflect not only on their experience and knowledge of social media marketing, but also on

their team dynamics, and their relationship with the target persona. The team report addresses (a) overall campaign performance with respect to its impact on the target persona and task performance as measured by metrics, (b) practicum learning objectives and outcomes, and (c) developmental experiences of team dynamics and their relationship with the target persona.

Key Take-aways

With a record of task performance and sample postings, the campaign report becomes a tangible take-away that students can show in job interviews. They can add various skills and experiences to their resumes and

LinkedIn profiles. Table 1 shows sample comments that illustrate how the practicum helped participants.

Technologies and analytics aside, students in the practicum greatly appreciate the challenge in practicing target marketing because their initial strategies often do not work as intended. Campaign metrics provide powerful reality checks that force them to go back to the drawing board. The successful teams are those that are initially humbled by their performance indicators and go back to the beginning to restudy their target, reset their objectives, and revamp their strategy. The practicum provides the context and opportunities for participants to acquire Kolb's experiential learning skills and achieve professional competency. Table 2 shows the extent to which practicum objectives are met as measured by participants' perceived benefits of

Table 1
Categorized Participant Comments

Effective learning	"This was an extremely useful experience, and helped me learn more about social media analytics and how you can promote and market your brand through social media."
Marketable skills	"This was a very worthwhile experience. I got to put this project on my resume and talk about it with employers."
Relevant experience	"Everything we've learned in this class has been so helpful in the real world. I've already started applying what I've learned to my current job and gained a lot of praise in doing so."
Teamwork experience	"... an eye-opening experience on how real-world projects work ... understanding the importance of communication, organization, and creativity, I enjoyed being able to start a project and see it evolve as my team members and my knowledge grew."
Marketing in practice	"Two unexpected outcomes were learning how difficult it was to engage our target persona and how to alter our strategy in order to better reach them."
Career preparedness	"As soon as I started interning, I was given a content calendar and an explanation of their target persona. Each week I would schedule posts based on the content calendar on our Hootsuite account. Thank goodness you had us use that in class."

Table 2
Participants' Perceived Benefits of the Practicum

	As a result of the practicum,	% of respondents agreed	Mean rating ^a	t test ^b above neutral 4.0
1.	I became interested in a career in social media marketing.	89%	5.9	Sig.
2.	I got an internship/job opportunities in social media marketing.	42%	4.1	<i>ns</i>
3.	I am able to contribute more to the social media marketing of my employer.	82%	5.7	Sig.
4.	I will continue to take advance training in social media marketing.	83%	5.7	Sig.
5.	I gained knowledge about my strengths in teamwork.	99%	6.3	Sig.
6.	I gained knowledge about my weaknesses in teamwork.	95%	6.1	Sig.
7.	I gained insights in my leadership style.	97%	6.3	Sig.
8.	I gained insights in my teamwork style.	97%	6.4	Sig.
9.	I gained knowledge of the factors that make a good team for me.	98%	6.4	Sig.

^a Rating scale, 1 to 7; 7 = *strongly agree*; 1 = *strongly disagree*.

^b $p < 0.05$. $N = 98$. Response rate: 70 percent.

the experience. Some participants ended up getting jobs and internships in social media marketing.

Impact and Recognition

In addition to student opinions in [Tables 1](#) and [2](#), the body of student work provides evidence of an effective practicum: Participants become competent in running social media campaigns. In the first year of the practicum, 140 marketing students in 36 teams participated. Their campaigns and postings generated interest in the people and activities of the CSUF marketing community. For example, there were over 7,706 views on 414 Facebook posts, 838 minutes watched on 40 videos, 91 “likes,” 47 comments, and 260 shares on 140 LinkedIn posts, as well as 141 retweets on 1,022 tweets. The contents also generated third-party mentions by outside organizations. The collective impact of student work, as well as outstanding achievements by teams and their captains, was recognized at the end of the semester. For example, the “Team With the Most Professional Campaign and Report” was announced with descriptions of their campaign and performance. Other recognitions included teams with the Most Effective Campaign, Most Innovative Campaign, Most Reach in a Single Post, and Most Engagement in a Single Post. The recognition report also provided examples of best practices for future participants.

CHALLENGES AND RESPONSES

Some challenges in adopting this practicum can be minimized by careful planning:

1. The practicum’s success depends on social networks that are enduring, accessible, and engaging. In choosing to serve the CSUF marketing community, the instructor minimizes the challenge for participants to relate to and engage with the audience in a meaningful relationship.
2. Some challenges relate to managing “stakeholder buy-in.” The instructor gets colleagues and student clubs to accept the plan and support promoting the practicum sites to the target audience. The institution social media staff is consulted and assured that the practicum’s identity will be made distinct from the institution’s brand and that its activities will follow professional guidelines. On media sites, visitors are informed that the

community is student-run and that postings are active only during the semester.

3. Background information on the community, such as the size of various segments and their media habits, is needed to properly guide team decisions on segment targeting. The author has conducted market research to provide this background information to participants.
4. Students do not experience the critical thinking that comes with determining the most effective number and schedule of campaign posts when the instructor sets the requirements. To improve learning, the instructor may ask each team to recommend the number and schedule of posts in the precampaign plan and give feedback.

ADAPTABILITY FOR OTHER MARKETING COURSES

Studies indicate that most faculty do not make extensive use of Facebook, LinkedIn, or Twitter, and rarely utilize them for social interactions and connections in student assignments (Seaman & Tinti-Kane, 2013; Tuten & Marks, 2012). This proposed social media practicum offers a meaningful pedagogic option. The practicum serves well as an assignment in a social media class. In the author’s institution, where a social media class has yet to be offered, the practicum is an assignment in a class that covers databases, marketing math, and marketing technologies. The practicum thus provides students with experience in live analytics. It can also be a stand-alone one-credit independent study to cater to students interested in social media. For a marketing capstone class with the learning objective of understanding marketing strategy and applying previously learned concepts, the practicum offers a viable alternative to traditional team assignments such as marketing plans, working with real companies, or simulations. Because there is flexibility in the scope and complexity of this practicum, students from the Principles of Marketing class can also participate. For example, each student team could limit their campaign to one channel instead of four, be assigned a lighter schedule, and focus their report on applying marketing concepts and principles to social media campaigns.

In sum, the practicum rests on the notion that students learn best when given the opportunity to practice working with digital media in serving a real

community. The practicum creates a learning environment and a social media virtual laboratory for their testing of creative ideas. In the process of building, engaging, and serving a community, educators may adapt media types, time and number of tasks, scope of responsibility, and roles of participants, to achieve the learning objectives of different courses in a marketing curriculum.

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