WHAT'S NEW ABOUT A NEW IDEA: STUDENT CREATIVITY IN THE MARKETING CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

Students and educators face the challenge to improve the business world through creative leverage. This study provides guidance for improving student creative activity through the development of a new product idea in a marketing plan. The authors have analyzed various aspects of student new product ideas: innovativeness, technological advancement, and customization of product. The results indicated that students generate new product ideas based on their motivation, disciplinary knowledge, personal experience, and the instructor on teaching methods. The paper provides marketing educators with recommendations on how to be successful in developing and encouraging student creativity.

INTRODUCTION

Businesses are always seeking creative ideas for new products, services and marketing activities. Innovativeness provides organizations with a big competitive advantage in the marketplace. The Emerson Electric Company reported a healthy growth in sales of nearly 13 percent a year after the company improved its innovation efforts (Hindo, 2008). Innovation often drives sales and profit. According to the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), U.S. corporations registered a record number of international patents in 2007 that kept them number one in world. At the same time, Japanese corporations ranked number two and German corporations number three, just behind the U.S. innovators. Growth in patents by a number of countries in northeast Asia confirms a shifting pattern of innovation around the world (Report, World Intellectual Property Organization, 2007). There is no question that strategic uses of innovative ideas, products or activities are imperative in today's knowledge-driven business.

The challenge for marketing educators is to retool curriculum content so that it is relevant to students, who must compete in a global economy defined by innovation and change, and to employers, who engage in state-of-the-art marketing practices (Smart et al., 1999).

With business facing an era of innovation and creative thinking more than ever before, marketing educators need to reconsider their teaching practices to ensure that graduating students know what to do. Most marketing courses require assignments, projects and presentations as teaching tools for providing and measuring marketing knowledge and skills. We are much concerned with students' of use appropriate marketing theories, methods and practices. We often focus our grading measurement on student perceptions of knowledge (McCorkle et al., 2007) and unfortunately, we are less concerned with encouraging and developing creative thinking skills in our marketing students (Ramocki, 1993; McIntyre et al., 2003).

The importance of creativity in the marketing classroom has been the focus of several marketing educators (Ramocki, 1994, 1996; Titus, 2000, 2007; McCorkle, 2007; Borin et al., 2007).Titus (2007) created the conceptual scope of the Creative Marketing Breakthrough model (CMB). He identified that an individual's ability to produce Creative Marketing Breakthroughs is dramatically affected by four key psychological constructs of creativity: (a) task motivation, (b) serendipity, (c) cognitive flexibility, and (d) disciplinary knowledge.

The establishment of several organizations shows support for the growing importance of creativity in society today. Both the American Creative Association and Creative Education Foundation provide educators and businesses a large amount of supportive information to improve and motivate creative thinking. Other research suggests that to be innovative, students must develop the capacity to listen closely to consumers; think creatively about solutions to customer needs; employ tools and techniques that generate, modify and improve new product ideas; and bring new products to market (Borin, Metcalf, & Tietje, 2007).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To examine the creative ability of students choosing a business career, we have used the data from a marketing plan assignment. The data were collected for spring and fall semesters from 2006 through

2008. The sample frame for the study consisted of 76 student marketing plans in the Principles of Marketing course in a public western university. These students were undergraduate level juniors of the Business School. The majority of students held majors in marketing, management, accounting or finance. The assignment was designed to expose students to the basic elements of a marketing plan, as a comprehensive project for the course. To design the marketing plan, students had one important condition – to create a non-existing product idea. The purpose of this condition was to encourage and improve students' creativity skills. The goal of this research is to investigate the variety of new product ideas for the marketing plans and then based on this, to measure students creativity level. Despite the fact that the marketing plan is frequently used in a variety of research studies, we only analyzed the new product ideas created by students.

We studied the question of how to find a magic set of measures of student creativity related to their new product idea. The marketing literature includes many methods to measure student creativity and one of them is the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking (TTCT). The TTCT provides scores of abilities on five dimensions: Fluency, Originality, Abstractness of Titles, Elaboration, and Resistance Premature Closure (McIntyre, Hite, & Rickard, 2003). Other research develops some criteria to evaluate a new product idea. First and foremost, ideas need to be evaluated with respect to their appropriateness and novelty. Will the idea actually resolve the problem? The role of creativity in the Problem-Solving Process was analyzed by Titus (2000) in the marketing education literature.

The business world provides many well developed measures of new product ideas. One valuable research of new products is the one developed by Robert G. Cooper (2001). He defined "Newness" in two ways: (a) new to the company, in the sense that a firm has never made this type of product before; and (b) new to the market or "innovative," the product is the first of its kind on from the Booz-Allen Hamilton Company described "Newness" as "new-to-the-world" (Booz-Allen, Hamilton, 1982). Also, Cooper in his research identified three levels of innovativeness. He simplified three classes of new product ideas in terms of innovativeness:

- Highly innovative products: New-to-the-world products and innovative new product lines to the company;
- Moderately innovative products: Consisting of new lines to the firm, with products that are not as innovative and new items in existing product lines for the firm (not new to the market);
- Low innovative products: Consisting of all others; including modifications to existing products, redesigned products, and the repositioning of product.

Cooper's classification of new products was used in this research to measure the student level of creativity.

RESULTS

To measure the students' creativity of their new product idea in their marketing plan, we analyzed three categories:
- innovativeness
- technological advancement
- customization of product

Innovativeness

As discussed earlier, we measured the student new product ideas in terms of innovativeness in three levels: highly, moderately and low innovative product ideas. The results are shown in Table 1. The research developed by Cooper (2001), showed that highly innovative products have a higher success rate (78 percent) than the moderately innovative category. Also, the moderately innovative products performance lags far behind the other two groups. Obviously, our research also identified the possible performance problem with the huge middle category of student innovative ideas.

The results displayed in Table 1 demonstrate that students created more product ideas in the moderately innovative category (52.7 percent) than in the highly innovative product idea category. Also, our research shows that the student marketing plan with a highly innovative product idea is usually more theoretical than practical, since the product concept is so new (as one student called it, a "vague idea"). Perhaps, the highly innovative idea should be handled in a special way. Highly innovative embryonic ideas are fragile things. Our research shows a relatively high percentage of product ideas from the low innovative category (27.5 percent). We found that ideas from this category include moderate or no technological advances. But from real business practice, Cooper's research shows a high success rate for both low innovative products as well as highly innovative products.

TABLE 1
Level of Innovativeness Based On
Student New Product Ideas

Level of innovativeness	Number of cases (mean = 76)	Percentage (%)	Examples of student product ideas
Highly innovative product ideas	15	19.8	"Life Guardian:" self-activated human tracking device with tracking chip in a keychain; "Smell-o-Vision:" product attached to a TV set to produce an actual smell/aroma from picture being displayed on TV ; "Shower Management System:" SMS allows the user to program up to 6 shower preferences: temperature, water pressure, showerhead height, length of time, essential oil scent and other
Moderately innovative product ideas	40	52.7	Washer/dryer combination; Self-heating/cooling can. The consumer twists the base of the can, which releases the chemical elements that when mixed with water can produce heat or cold; Customized snowboard, as an original piece of art, using new product materials; Software for Playstation 4 ; Extendable toy box
Low innovative product ideas	21	27.5	Frozen sweet potato fries; Vehicle electric ice scraper; Built in car air freshener

Technological Advancement

It is no secret that one of the drivers of innovation in business today is technological advancement. It drives corporate revenue, market share and finally profit. To further isolate the differences in product ideas in the student marketing plans, we analyzed the level of technological advancement in new ideas. We divided all marketing plan ideas into one of three categories: high technological advancement, moderate technological advancement, and no technological effects. The results are shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2
Level of Technological Advancement Based On
Student New Product Ideas

Level of technological advancement	Number of cases (mean = 76)	Percentage (%)
High technological advancement	36	47.4
Moderate technological advancement	12	15.8
No technological effects	28	36.8

The students' preferences primarily fell into two categories: high technological advancement and no technological effects. At the same time, the analysis revealed that more than half of the new product ideas had high or moderate technological advancement (63.2 percent). This research shows a significant benefit for educators. In order to capture the students' interest, educators need to use more data, facts, cases and other learning material based on technological products of importance to students, such as mobile phones, computers, MP3 and DVD players, sports and outdoor technology. We further explored the areas of student new product ideas. 26.3 percent of the product ideas included a technological advancement in the communication industry or electronic devices; 26.3 percent of product ideas related to sports or outdoor activities and safety equipment, including clothing; and only 15.8 percent of product ideas came from the food and beverage industry.

Customization (Personalization) of Products

Another important aspect of innovation in business now relates to rapidly changing customer needs (Cooper, 2001). A large portion of changing customer needs is related to the personal approach to products. Young consumers especially like products which are personalized with their own colors, designs, flavors, and fall under the category "just for me." Many products today reflect the personal characteristics of each consumer. It is an important factor for marketing educators to help students to understand the customization of products. To measure this phenomenon in student product ideas, we developed two categories: (1) product ideas with personal components – personalization of product; (2) standard product for a large segment of users, no personal components. The results of our research are shown in Table 3.

TABLE 3
Level of Customization Based On Student
New Product Ideas

Level of customization	Number of cases (mean = 76)	Percentage (%)
Product with personal components	66	87.0
Product without personal components	10	13.0

The research shows that surprisingly 87.0 percent of the new product ideas include personal components or a high level of customization of the product. This is a good illustration that the students like personalization of products which may yield a strong competitive advantage with the younger market.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on findings from this research we have recommendations for both students and educators related to new product ideas used in the development of marketing plan assignments.

To be successful in creating a new idea, students need to have:
1. Task motivation. Based on the Titus research of the Creative Marketing Breakthrough Model (CMB), motivation is an important requirement to help individuals find solutions (Titus, 2007). In our situation, students have a task which is to complete the marketing plan. Their motivation is to be successful in this task in order to gain knowledge and receive a high grade for the project. Obviously, motivation is an important part of the creative marketing experience in the marketing plan.
2. Disciplinary knowledge, as marketing, management, accounting, and others.
3. Past and current life experience, which builds the necessary innovative skills. Research indicates that students with good creative thinking skills have a wide spectrum of work and life experience.
4. Personal commitment and open for challenge. Our research shows that students, who engaged in the critique of other student ideas and themselves, improve crucial marketing skills – to be creative.

To be successful in developing student creative ideas, educators need to:
1. Provide various experiential learning techniques to promote student creativity.
2. Be creative themselves. To evaluate the student marketing plan and the new product idea, the educator needs to have their own experience in developing new product ideas and marketing plans.
3. Challenge students with thought provoking questions and tasks, and create an in-class critical thinking atmosphere. Critical thinking skills are an important part of the value creation (Titus, 2000). Educators can create disequilibrium in the class by offering ambiguous findings, stirring emotions in students and balancing support with challenge in the classroom (Karns, Clayson, Frontczak, & Kelley, 2002).
4. Provide students with disciplinary knowledge for each class activity, focus on innovative approach, and encourage them to learn from a variety of college courses because creative ideas often come from a combination of more than one concept, field, or discipline. Cross-fertilization and synthesis of knowledge are key in creativity (Titus, 2007).
5. Be technologically competent and knowledgeable about new technological products, especially in areas where students are technologically competent.
6. Add to the grading policy of the student marketing plan the creative/innovative criteria.
7. Encourage students to work on their own skills with the hope that some day her or his innovative idea, such as another Post-It Notes product or IPod, will result.

This research should be beneficial in encouraging marketing professors to develop and reward creativity in their classrooms. For future research we recommend investigation of students' personal characteristics, such as age, work experience, major, and others that will affect their creativity in the marketing plan assignment.

References Available on Request