

Developing Creative Thinking in the Direct Marketing Classroom
through Digital Story Making?

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Abstract

Change produces new challenges and opportunities. Creative thinking is necessary to address new issues. Although the need for creativity has been acknowledged in the academic literature, it is not a mainstream skill that business schools set as a priority.

The marketing horizon is saturated with change, new: technology, products, processes, consumer services, consumer experiences, exchange methods, payment methods, distribution methods, communication vehicles, methods for measuring responsiveness and methods for evaluating consumer behavior. Effective solutions require both critical thinking and creative thinking. Because of its technological nature, direct marketing is severely impacted. Basic issues in direct marketing: tracking, targeting, interactivity, immediacy and performance analytics are all affected by technology changes and require creative thinking.

In this paper we argue that direct marketing courses need to develop creative thinking skills among students. Digital story making (developing plots and themes for video), is offered as a useful activity in the direct marketing class for fostering creative thinking. Informal feedback from students support this claim and also suggests that story making also helps develop other useful business skills.

Introduction

The world is changing rapidly. Scientific advances are accelerating causing advances in technology which are affecting every aspect of life. Across the world, social, political, business and educational environments are shifting and transforming. More sophisticated products, climate change, re-distribution of wealth, emerging third world countries as manufacturers, suppliers and consumers, advances in communication and global access to the Internet are all impacting everyday life. Kotler (1995) emphasized the need to adapt to change as a major aspect of maintaining a successful business, and specifically, the need for a vision. In the 21st century business environment, those who have the vision to imagine and develop effective solutions will be the ones who are considered valuable to an organization.

From a business perspective, changes in the market place are monumental. People around the world now have the ability to shop from and supply to the global market place, and they have the ability to exchange money for products with an expectation of fast, accurate, risk free, high quality and dependable delivery. Imagine, we are now living in an era where overnight delivery is not fast enough.

For marketers the need to keep current with technology and consumer trends is essential for remaining competitive. New consumer goods produce new consumer expectations and marketers need to continuously monitor new trends. It is not difficult to imagine that in the near future consumers will have universal access to a vast market place where they will enjoy immediate, personal service, conducted in a pleasant and professional manner, with a high quality, high speed, highly accurate and risk free exchange.

Marketers will play an instrumental role in responding to the needs of consumers in this new customer –centric universe (Sheth et al, 2000) and they will need creative thinking skills. It is also recognized that marketers will need to go beyond customer satisfaction and create experiences that delight customers; they will need to deliver superior customer value (Treacy and Wierseman, 1993), another call for creative thinking. Direct marketing is changing even more rapidly than general marketing. The intimate relationship with technology and subsequent continuous change of the playing field makes creative thinking even more imperative for direct marketers. Direct marketing professionals can expect marketing challenges that require faster and more accurate methods for targeting consumers, engaging in immediate and interactive dialogue and measuring the effectiveness of campaigns in real time. As such, direct marketers will be routinely required to utilize their creative thinking abilities. In this paper we propose that creative thinking skills, in agreement with Ramocki (1994, 2014), should be a prominent learning objective in all marketing courses, especially in direct marketing courses.

The rest of this paper summarizes how higher education needs to prepare college students for social and business opportunities by developing creative thinking skills. Some examples of creative thinking activities are presented. One specific activity, digital story making, is explained in this paper with specific comments on how to enrich creative thinking in the direct marketing classroom. An informal set of student comments is provided which suggest the value of story making in the direct marketing classroom.

Literature Review

Marketers have been preaching ideas like: The Customer is King (Grabner 2009), Customers are the Center of our business, the customer is always right Leonard (1990), Customer satisfaction is the number 1 priority, Mutzier (1998), etc. for several decades. And to better understand consumers, business organizations must conduct research, analyze consumers and develop expertise in processing consumer information. Near the end of the 20th century, business educators were discussing the need for a knowledge economy and knowledge engineering (Studer et al., 1997). But in the early part of the 21st century, educators were starting to acknowledge the need for creativity skills in the business organization (Goodnight 2005). A Special Report in *Business Week* (Get Creative - 2005), described the need for creativity as a core competency in business.

Businesses need to adopt to the environment, specifically because of changes in technology, consumer trends, social values, political regulations and demographic shifts. As the changes accelerate, businesses need to develop flexibility and agility as they develop new product offerings, policies and procedures. The ability to design, engineer and manage these changes requires creative thinking.

Changes in technology affect society in terms of values and needs, and affect education in terms of information delivery. Technology provides educators with seemingly instant access to libraries of information and with the capability of instantly projecting multimedia presentations, capable of summarizing information in a dramatic and engaging manner. Professors can stand in a classroom with powerful digital tools that can assist in transferring information in a dramatic fashion. Even more incredible is that students also have new, powerful tools within their grasp. The smart phone and tablet eliminate the need for printed textbooks. They also provides students with the ability to retrieve information instantly from essentially any hotspot in the world, any time of day. And

students can display information, examine visuals, listen to music, play games, watch videos, create videos and edit videos with their technology.

The college student of the 21st century sits in the classroom with a fantastic information retrieval device, a virtual entertainment center, a social communication device and a device that can be used to create art. This has caused college professors extreme concern and stress as they compete for the attention of their students. However, professors should consider this as an opportunity rather than a problem. The typical college student has had years of experience with hand held electronic devices and it is very difficult for him / her to put the device aside and listen to a passive lecture for more than 10 minutes. On the other hand, students can be required to use their devices to explore, learn and create. In other words, college students can use their “etools” (hand held electronic communication devices) to enhance their active and experiential learning activities. College professors should look at etools, not as distractors but as supplements to their lectures, and should utilize the etools to transfer knowledge and develop useful business skills.

Business education has been changing dramatically in the past 4 decades and it will need to continue to evolve as technology and social change continue to affect consumer values and consumer demands. It is not uncommon to hear business educators discuss classroom experiential activities. Research conducted by Kolb (2015) suggests a greater use of the application of theory to practice (experiential learning – Kolb has been suggesting this for more than 30 years) in the classroom in an effort to more effectively transfer knowledge. Articles in business education, Hamer (2000) and Lewis and Williams (1994), reveal pedagogical strategies such as: case studies, guest speakers from the business community, computer simulation games, classroom games – role playing, internships, practicums, all formulated to give business students a more realistic

perspective of how theory is applied to business issues. Business educators have acknowledged the value of this strategy and have developed courses in which they lecture on relevant content and subsequently coordinate experiential activities in an effort to enhance content learning and to develop relevant business management skills; written communication, oral presentation, analytical thinking, computer software competency, team work, leadership and most often recognized and revered, critical thinking.

Recognizing the continuous evolution of business, society and education, this paper suggests that for marketing students, particularly direct marketing students, in addition to the need for developing critical thinking skill, another skill of deservedly equal importance that should be incorporated in business education is creative thinking. The literature is rich with articles that stress creative thinking, for example Sternberg, (1995), Kirby (2004) and Haring –Smith (2006). Accepting the inherent value of creative thinking, some researchers have conducted studies to demonstrate that creative thinking can actually be enhanced in a classroom setting, Torrance (1972) and Koloff and Feldhusen (1984). There are a variety of methods that can be used to develop creative thinking, but whatever the technique, students need to practice repeatedly.

Although educators have recommended creative thinking activities for several decades, it is not a major learning objective in most business classes. Even the AACSB Organization (2013) (the prominent accreditation organization for higher education business programs) does not recognize the need for creativity. Under skills they list: written and oral communication, ethical understanding, analytic thinking, IT, diversity experience, reflective thinking and application of knowledge.

For marketing and direct marketing, the pedagogical discussion focused on creativity is scant. Ramocki (2014) notes that over the last 2 decades, when creativity in marketing was first mentioned, fewer than 20 articles have appeared in marketing education journals and only 6 or 7 addressed teaching creativity. And yet one could argue that among all departments in a business organization, creative thinking is most needed in the marketing department. Advertising agencies distinguish their own functional areas as the account side or the creative side.

The impact of technology and subsequently new media channels has been profound. Whereas the written word and printed paper served as an excellent method for communicating and advertising for hundreds of years, it is not farfetched to imagine that in the near future, printing on paper will be a rarity and a luxury. Information is becoming a digital commodity. In the 21st century the use of the internet, mobile phones and social media is the way people communicate and socialize and the way marketers are promoting and interacting with customers. For direct marketers, technology provides opportunities to enhance all of the unique characteristics of direct marketing: trackability, immediate response, interactivity and measurability. In fact the lines between marketing and direct marketing are fading as many traditional forms of general advertising have the ability to institute some of the direct marketing tactics, using digital channels for information collection, storage and analysis. Advertisers are also shifting their attention and resources to digital media; planning marketing campaigns that leverage the technology. Everyone is talking about Big Data and the only “Big Data” of interest is digital. The shift to digital media will require marketers to modify and create new processes. This effort will require creative thinking and it behooves business schools to acknowledge the need for creative thinking as a learning objective, especially within the marketing department.

Creativity

As business educators recognize the need for developing creative thinking skills, they must first understand what creativity is. There are many definitions of creativity, below are a few examples:

1. The use of the imagination or original ideas, especially in the production of an artistic work. https://www.google.com/?gws_rd=ssl#q=definition+creativity
2. Creativity is defined as the tendency to generate or recognize ideas, alternatives, or possibilities that may be useful in solving problems, communicating with others, and entertaining ourselves and others. (page 396) *Human Motivation*, 3rd ed., by Robert E. Franken:
3. In order to be creative, you need to be able to view things in new ways or from a different perspective. Among other things, you need to be able to generate new possibilities or new alternatives. Tests of creativity measure not only the number of alternatives that people can generate but the uniqueness of those alternatives. the ability to generate alternatives or to see things uniquely does not occur by change; it is linked to other, more fundamental qualities of thinking, such as flexibility, tolerance of ambiguity or unpredictability, and the enjoyment of things heretofore unknown. (page 394) <http://www.csun.edu/~vcpsy00h/creativity/define.htm>

___..."creative" refers to novel products of value, as in "...Creativity," then refers both to the capacity to produce such works, as in "How can we foster our employees' creativity?" and to the activity of generating such products, as in "Creativity requires hard work." (page 4) A "process of developing new, uncommon, or unique ideas"

<http://www.csun.edu/~vcpsy00h/creativity/define.htm>

For business, two specific attributes that reoccur are: novel and value.

Definition: Business Creativity

Creativity is the process of bringing something new into being. This definition must be completed by a quote of the famous French scientist Poincare: Inventions consist in not making useless combinations but in making those which are useful and what are only a small minority. It means that it's not enough to produce new ideas. You must produce operational ideas and not dreams.

the true creativity is the power to invent and design products and services that will ensure the success of your company. What is more, creativity consists in inventing

<http://www.freeworldacademy.com/newbizzadviser/fw3.htm>

For the business organization, a creative idea implies that the engineered product offering or business process is **new** (never been developed or implemented before) and just as importantly, the product offering or process **adds value** to the organization.

Assuming that creativity is important for business students and crucial for direct marketing students, can it actually be taught and developed in a college class room? There is evidence in the literature that supports the theory that creativity can be enhanced through training, e.g., Beghetto and Kaufman (2010). Some professors, tasked with addressing course content learning objectives and business school objectives, in an effort to meet accreditation standards and then conducting business school assessments, might feel that developing creative thinking is a luxury rather than a critical component. However as Starkos (2013) notes, teaching creativity should not be considered an addition to the curriculum, but rather a teaching strategy that enhances both content learning and creative thinking.

Methodology – Developing creative thinking skills

As a prerequisite to developing creative thinking activities, it is important to create an appropriate atmosphere, an atmosphere that is supportive, non-judgmental and encouraging. Creative thinking assignments do require more personal engagement and exposure; they require a greater degree of openness, support, practice and time.

Creativity Exercises

One can help students develop creative thinking skills by giving them practice with constructing ideas and thoughts that are new and potentially valuable. The following are 3 techniques that are easy to implement:

Technique 1 - Connect the known to the unknown 1) Students in America like to eat hamburgers (think toppings, condiments, other options) . 2) Make a list of protein sources that students from other cultures like to eat (protein source, toppings, condiments). This may require some research. 3) Create 3 different burger items that fuse these ideas together. Explain what your new burger is, who would find it valuable and why is would be valuable.

Technique 2 – Pairing - Make two lists of well- known concepts and then create pairs, 1 idea from each list. Determine if the pairing is new and has value. For example, 1) list things people like to do, 2) list places people like to visit. Now combine 1 idea from each list and determine if this is a new business opportunity. For example, people like to grow things – and people like to visit national parks, Fact - Trees in the Rocky National Park have been devastated by beetles. → New idea- Visitors to the national park should be invited to replant trees.

Technique 3 –Answer Questions WWWWH - Explore a business opportunity by manipulating **where-what- why -when and how** (one can also do this exercise by manipulating the 4ps). For example - Create a business to sell hotdogs, now answer - where – what – when, how and how much. 1) **Where** - high schools, city parks, soccer fields, art museums, miniature golf courses, kiosks at the mall, court houses, flea markets, the beach, in a roving truck, at airplane terminals, bus stops, on buses, professional offices, hair salons, department stores, etc. ...2) **What**– steamed, grilled, boiled, fried, baked, - 3) **When** – daytime, evening, breakfast, late at night, **5) Why** - satisfy hunger, entertainment, hookup, **2) What** - product changes – size- shape- weight –quality, fillers, topping, variations – insert fillers into the hotdogs, make hot dogs shaped with feet, wrap hotdogs in different bread forms: wraps, muffins, rolls, large green leafs,...4) **How much?** - \$1,-2-3-4-\$5, --

Now start creating combinations of what – where- when – why and how much and see if some combination offers a unique advantages to a specific consumer groups.

- ➔ New Business - Hotdogs hollowed out, filled with chili, wrapped in a thin bun, sold on college campuses for \$3.00, low calories, low carbs and tasty, sold after 6 PM until 3 AM.

DIRECT MARKETING

The challenge for the direct marketing class is to develop creative thinking skill activities that are relevant to direct marketing. In addition it would be nice if the activity reinforced course content and other useful business management skills. This paper suggests that digital story making is a useful activity. It has been applied by the author in 6 direct marketing classes over the past 4 years.

Activity – students are asked to create digital stories, 2-4 minute videos, which explain specific issues taught in the direct marketing class and discussed in the text. A partial list of video assignments are:

- Explain the difference between direct marketing and general advertising
- Describe 4 specific attributes of direct marketing
- Explain segmentation and how clustering helps segment a market place
- Describe predictive modeling using regression and how regression is helpful in identifying a target audience
- List 5 major components to be addressed when developing a direct marketing campaign, explain why the list is the most important component.
- List 5 important components to be considered in the direct marketing offer
- Present 3 major strategies for writing direct marketing letters (as discussed in the text)
- Explain what a storyboard is and how it is used
- Explain what needs to be done in an infomercial
- What needs to be written in a Direct Marketing Plan
- Present advantages and disadvantages of 3 different social media for a direct marketing campaign (You tube, Facebook, Twitter, Linked, Pinterest, Meetup, etc.,)

The activity requires students to make a video in which they must explain their topic and use their creativity to make the video engaging and entertaining to the audience. Students are told that the target audience is business students who have just finished an introductory course in marketing. How is creativity encouraged?

On the first day of class the professor shows a digital story (a short ad made by the professor and /or students). The ad is poorly made with a person explaining something in a monotone voice with no expression, gestures or movement. Next the professor leads a discussion in which students are asked to consider how the video could be improved, possibly referring to issues of wardrobe, gestures, voice modulation, personality, movement, facial expressions, setting, music, story, narration, characters, etc.....Then the professor might show an improved version of the video which already incorporates some of the aspects discussed. Once again, students are asked what else they could do to improve the video. Following the second discussion, the professor might ask students to work in groups and combine some of their ideas, asking them to tell the same story. Before the end of class the professor encourages the students to prepare for recording during the next class and to bring appropriate props and wardrobe. In the next class the students record their own videos. Either before this point or at this point students are given basic editing instruction; they are shown how to splice video, add music, add captions, etc. After a brief lecture on editing, students complete their videos and the videos are posted and shown at the following class. The final activity ends with some final reviews of the videos; it is very important to add positive, encouraging feedback. This is what you did well, this is what you might try to make the video better.

The desired result of the activity is to get students thinking and talking about story making and video production. Ideally the activity is encouraging and not embarrassing for the students;

things are going well if the students recognize the potential value of the process as a means for developing effective and engaging communication and marketing promotion.

For the second project, students are given a direct marketing issue (as described previously) and asked to create a story to explain the important aspects of the issue in question. At this point it is assumed that students understand different components of video production that can be manipulated to tell an effective story. In the second challenge students are encouraged to develop a story. Specifically, students are asked to consider their target audience, their product and their message, identify the general theme and story plot of the product benefit and identify an appropriate format such as: : fantasy, musical, scientific explanation, slice of life, etc. For example the issue is the 3 types of lists available for rent. The target audience is business sophomores. The theme is, marketers need to be cost conscience in their spending and smart in their targeting, emphasize on ROI. The plot might be a business office where one individual is trying to select the right kind of list and his life or career depends on being effective in his choice. This is done as a slice of life story theme. Students may be asked to write a brief that describes the story they want to make.

The following check list can be used to get students started:

- Topic / Product / Issue
- Target audience
- Product benefits
- Story theme
- Story plot
- Story format
- Setting
- Actors
- Wardrobe
- Props
- Music

- Sound Effects
- Dialogue (expressions)
- Movement

This part of the activity combines creative thinking with critical thinking, organization / planning, team work, and communication.

Throughout the course 3-4 story making activities are assigned. The projects should be effective at developing creative thinking because: students enjoy videos and enjoy watching themselves (intrinsic motivation); students understand the technology that is needed and should feel confident that they can be successful; students should consider story making relevant to their lives, students should appreciate the relevance of story making to direct marketing; students should better understand the direct marketing concepts taught in class, students should appreciate the many combinations or approaches to creating direct marketing communications and students should recognize the value of videos in the new economy. Perhaps one of the biggest benefits is that several students will have an opportunity to gain skill in teamwork, organization, time management and leadership.

Observations (Informal results)

No attempt was made to formally examine the effectiveness of developing creativity in the direct marketing class using digital story making. However, students were asked to comment on the activity after grades were turned in. The following is a sample of some of the comments.

- *Creating videos helped us put what we were learning into context, instead of just reading it out of a book and hoping it stuck, we had to come up with situations in which they applied and then shoot, edit and present them.*

I cannot think of another activity that would make us think in a way to apply the situations to real life. Plus we enjoyed making them and we got to show our creative sides

In most of these assignments we had no clue where to start, so we would pick a random product or an idea and then think about how that tied into what we were learning. So we were forced to think outside of the box and bounce ideas off each other

An important skill we learned was patience. Sometimes the lessons would get frustrating because you can't seamlessly tie in everything you need to, so you need to get creative

It was a fun, new way to think about the material, more material from that class stuck than all the classes where the professor just talks off a slide to you

The pros of creating videos > put knowledge into real situations instead of just imagining them, it was a lot more interesting than just reading off a slide

Pros - good way to get to know classmates and different ways of thinking

Cons: annoying group mates

I thoroughly enjoyed this class, the videos forced people to interact and make fun of ourselves, by the end we were very close, made the class that much better (AG)

- *I explored a lot of tools to complete the projects. Movie Maker is super simple and still works. Working in the marketing field, I bet I will encounter quick projects like these. Making those videos actually allowed us to talk more, express our ideas and work together more. Marketing requires a lot of team work to arrange it. (VB)*
- *Videos can be very effective because not only are you listening but you are seeing as well. In my opinion it helps you learn better and remember concepts. It is an interesting change of pace compared to the traditional lecture.*

***Creating videos helps develop a variety of skills** – specifically communication, presentation, software competency, critical thinking, team work and leadership. (PF)*

- *Video skills are transferrable, increase creativity, organization and attention to detail, better than book work, opportunity to work with others, relevant to Direct Marketing. Videos helps remember concepts, should be more video assignments in the course, (KR)*
- *I think developing video skills is important, most hands on and realistic experience, forces students to apply ideas and concepts in a new setting. Enjoyment level is high, it is a great way to learn a topic (CC)*

- *It was more enjoyable than studying for a test, fun and **creative way to learn topics**, I have to make sure I understand the concept correctly, I had to read the text over and over. It helps students break out of their shell (AJ)*

In summary, students recognized that digital story making did encourage creative thinking and other desirable skills.

Conclusions

Business education requires that students master business concepts and develop useful business skills. Many educators have focused on developing critical thinking skills in an effort to prepare students for the business community. In this paper we argue that business students, specifically direct marketing students, should also develop creative thinking skills. Creative thinking is not frequently mentioned explicitly in job posting as a desired skill. It is also not frequently found in AACSB business school plans nor in the business education literature. However it is a logical prerequisite for developing effective marketing strategies and tactics. For the direct marketing class, one specific activity, digital story making, is discussed as an activity to develop creative thinking. This activity was selected because it is relevant to student's competencies, it is relevant to current technology, it can be used as an experiential activity (students create infomercials at the end of the semester), it helps students understanding the potential value of social media as a direct marketing channel and in helps students understand how direct marketing is impacted with this strategy of communication. An informal discussion among direct marketing students after the story making activity reveals that students do feel their creative thinking, as well as other important skills, were exercised. Students also felt that the activity was interesting, entertaining and relevant for learning direct marketing topics.

Future Research

Direct marketing educators should develop experiential learning activities that develop important skills and transfer appropriate knowledge. Digital story making is one strategy proposed in this paper. There may be several other strategies equally effective. It would be interesting to conduct research to determine which strategies produce the best learning outcomes as well as skill in critical and creative thinking.

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