

# Adopting e-Learning Tools into Marketing Courses to Encourage Students Experience Their Own Decision-Making Attitudes

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**Abstract.** The paper resumes experiential adoptions of selected e-learning tools used into the educating process of undergraduate and postgraduate classes in Marketing for a decade. Couples of specialized marketing tools that support academics into both the teacher-student interrelations offline, and the peer-to-peer interactions online are outlined. The paper review includes: a Marketing Simulation Tool, a Conjoint Analysis Module, an Operations Management Simulation, a Positioning Game. A discussion of student experiences is generated. Crucial learning outcomes are represented by means of theory acknowledgement and practice embodiment while students test their own decision-making.

**Keywords.** Higher education, Marketing simulations, Experiential learning, Conjoint analysis, Positioning game.

## 1. Introduction

Adopting simulation tools in marketing courses as a ground for experiential learning exercise is becoming a more than necessary task. It is turning into a demanding *modus operandi* when it comes to the issue of when students are supposed to understand decision-making causalities. Marketing simulations are developed to encourage students to experience their own decision-making attitudes. They put them into a hypothetical market context where, as learners, they are to generate situations and unfold model decision loops. The *modus* is built on setting clear marketing goals and leaning towards an “analysis-decision-analysis” iteration. Such an interactive procedure could include the following steps: a) conducting a situation analysis, b) setting goals and choosing a strategy for further policy execution, c) coming to a decision-making based on a wisely spread budget, d) submitting decisions, and e) reflecting on feedback.

The purpose of the report is to outline the academic experience of using marketing simulation tools addressed to facilitate Marketing courses in undergraduate and postgraduate classes. The ultimate goal is to perform and track (to announce) the symbiosis of mediative teaching process and self-debriefing learning activity when the decision-making issue is tackled. As a ground of the experiential learning paradigm, it has its favourable influence on students’ disposition to make their decisions in Marketing cases.

## 2. Experiential learning for decision-making in academic classroom

Using specialized simulation tools in the academic space, a teacher provides a supportive learning environment for students as a ground for an active experiential learning

called “situational learning” [5]. As an incorporation of active, participatory opportunities in a course, experiential learning occurs whenever the student is aroused from the role of a passive listener to that of an active respondent. Learning creates opportunities for "data learning" when students are intended to participate in determination of the learning process itself.

Considered as role-playing instruments, simulation tools, on one hand, engage students with a proactive behaviour helping them to express opinions and use inductive reasoning [10]. And, on the other hand, they provide opportunities for the teacher to improve his/her teaching productivity. Moreover, they support students to experiment with their ideas, advancing and employing concepts into real situations. Learning by situation simulating considerably enhances the students’ engagement with the problematics studied and makes them participate in what Michaly Csikszentmihalyi called “flow experience” [6].

Academics who use simulations employ characteristics of authentic pedagogy when designing their teaching and assessment activities. Most use simulations to provide a real world experience that allows students to develop the kinds of skills and competencies they will need in their working lives. Academics provide a full range of tasks to capture a breadth of student learning preferences and to allow for knowledge and skill development. They see reflective activities as a means for students to really interrogate their own learning and to make connections between theory and practice. Although possible group problems that could emerge (generally because one or more members does not contribute) [12], all see the benefits of teamwork and collaboration in helping students to learn and fill the gaps in their learning.

Diversity of learner groups is a characteristic of higher education today. Students within programmes are therefore likely to come with a range of different learning characteristics and backgrounds. These characteristics include differences in prior knowledge, abilities, personality and household background, language competence, motivation, expectations towards achievement, preferred ways of learning, willingness to engage in collaboration, and current levels of understanding. Students also approach learning differently.

They could take a surface or a deep approach to learning. In the context of a simulation, students might have different levels of knowledge and understanding of the concepts that underlie the game and international students may struggle with language and terminology. Other students may have less prior training or skill in the financial and numerical concepts that could help them interpret results. Nevertheless, marketing simulations allow students to engage in sufficient and varied activities to ensure that they cover all the associated learning outcomes. [12] Making regular decisions, whether over a short intensive period or over 6-10 weeks, and then having the opportunity to interpret results, are examples of the regular activity provided by simulation's themselves.

Marketing simulation tools used in higher education become a powerful drive that contributes to better academic education of principles and practical aspects in marketing rationale. Playing simulations, students experiment differentiated implementations of marketing strategy. They make their tactical marketing decisions and receive a prompt feedback from the simulation, which measures their individual performances by means of selected marketing KPIs. Role-playing helps students to overcome the abstractness of the terminology, studying the terms in context and interrelations. Prior to the experiential learning process, the teacher delivers critical instructions to the participants, paying attention by sole discretion to selected particulars that are to be interactively experienced and cognitively loaded.

### 3. Selection of Marketing Simulation Tools Carried Out in Educational Process

#### Marketing Simulation: Managing Segments and Customers

The simulation is an online-based interactive tool [1, 2]. In using it, students make decisions regarding a company’s marketing strategy. They make important decisions – regarding product design, pricing, discount structure, marketing expenditures, sales-force size – that should collectively support an overall marketing strategy designed to achieve a combination of sustainable revenues and profits over 12 fiscal quarters. Performance is measured using both qualitative and quantitative indicators, including profitability, revenues, unit sales, market share, and customer satisfaction (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Marketing Simulation: Managing Segments and Customers, V2. Market Research

The main learning objective is for students to understand the link between marketing strategy formulation and its effective implementation and execution. They need to gain an understanding of segmentation, targeting, and positioning issues. Moreover, students learn to use segment/customer needs analysis to make product design decisions. They manage customer acquisition and customer retention strategies.

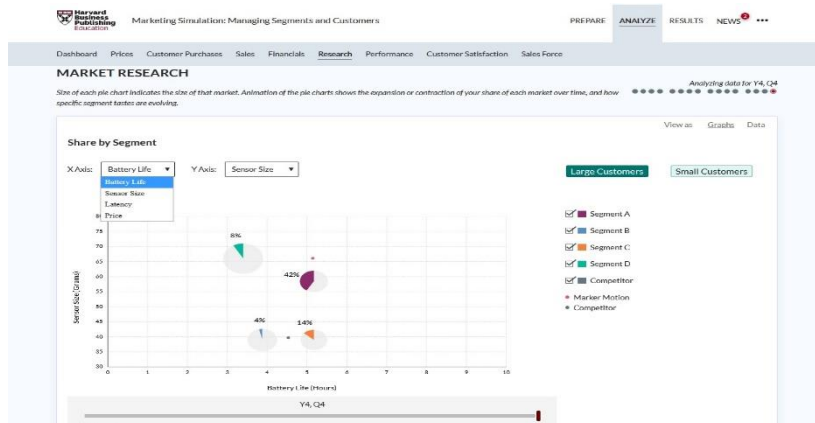


Fig. 2. Marketing Simulation: Managing Segments and Customers, V3. Market Research Tab.

Along the presented decade, two versions of the tool were announced within the Harvard Business Publishing of Educators and adopted in considered Marketing classes. Moreover, a third one has already been out since November 2019 (Fig. 2). The main update is the new Market Motion Ltd. case that makes students take into account three product features, instead of two, as they were in previous versions of the Minnesota Micromotors Ltd. Case (Fig. 1). Hence, a new learning objective should pursue the issue of interdependency between combinations of variables (product feature and product price) [2].

### *Marketing Simulation: Using Conjoint Analysis for Business Decisions*

This simulation is part of a comprehensive Conjoint Analysis Toolkit, which includes two modules: The Conjoint Analysis Online Tutorial and the Conjoint Analysis Do it Yourself Guide [8, 9]. The simulation is designed to reinforce student understanding and use the conjoint analysis as one of the most popular market research methods in academia and practice (Fig. 3).

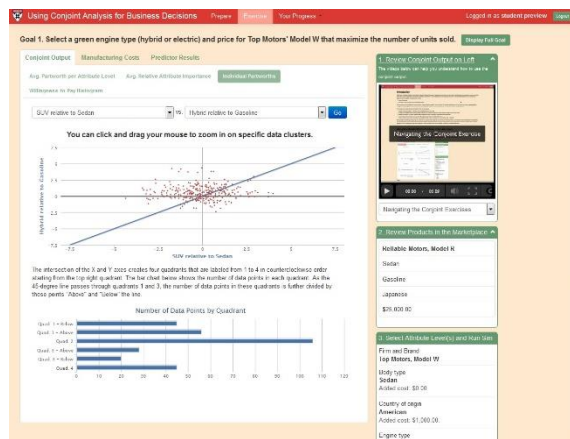


Fig. 3. Interface of the Marketing Simulation: Conjoint Analysis for Business Decisions.

Its goal is to provide students with an appreciation of how conjoint analysis output can be relevant in practice, and to provide an interactive experience of using conjoint analysis for managerial decision-making. Delivered online, the simulation gives students exposure to key business concepts such as demand curves, segmentation, profit functions, competitive responses, vertical and horizontal differentiation, optimal pricing, niche vs. mass market strategies, product portfolio management, and brand equity.

### *Operation Management Simulation: Benihana*

That simulation tool helps students explore the principles of operations and service management while working through a series of challenges set during a single evening at a busy Benihana restaurant (Fig. 4).

The teaching plan is to help students systematically unearth the elements of service profitability, determining how each aspect of the operation contributes to superior financial performance. In the process, students learn how to apply important principles of operations management. Students come to realize how terms such as throughout capacity, demand variability, capacity utilization and service time apply to a service production process. The most important message the simulation conveys to the learners is that the profitability could be the KPI for designing and evaluating scenario-driven servuction strategies. Students learn to analyse capacity, demand rates, cycle time, and throughput in a service operation. Running the simulation, they optimize the capacity in an attempt to optimize multiple variables in an

operation and to ensure the consistency of the overall strategy [11].

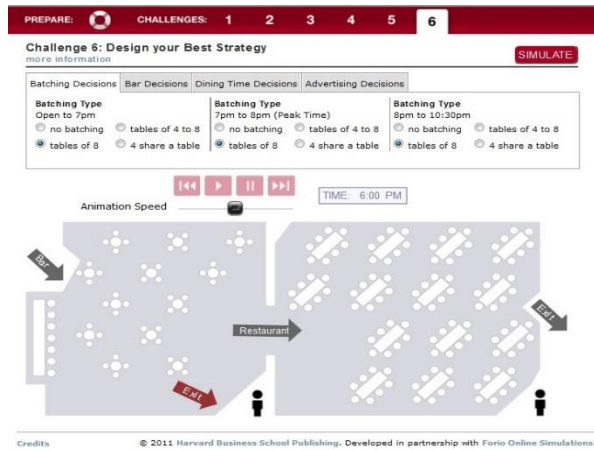


Fig. 4. Simulation Interface of Challenge 6: Design your Best Strategy.

### *Marketing Simulation: The Positioning Game*

Using perceptual maps, students make decisions about launching new products in the context of impending market competition. It is a multi-player tool where students compete in the launch of a new or enhanced product by positioning their brand at an ideal place in the market. [3] Decisions are made in real time, and costs are incurred with positioning changes. Launching new products into new or established markets provides the greatest opportunity for a company to think strategically and to reap the benefits of these decisions [Fig 5].

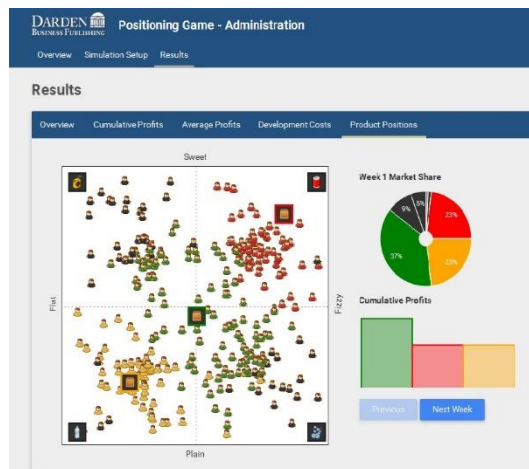


Fig. 5. Positioning Game Interface: Results. Darden Business Publishing.

A core learning objective of the simulation is to introduce the critical role of market structure and product positioning in marketing strategy. Students need to analyse markets and recognize consumer segments, underserved segments, and ideal points for targeting opportunities. They learn to comment on brand perceptions, similarities, and differences, and recognize perception problems.

#### 4. Discussion

Table 1 illustrates the total number of students enrolled into the four Marketing simulations during the decade 2010-2019. Approximately 300 students (73 undergraduates and 230 postgraduates) participated in the experiential learning experiment. Undergraduate students were those who enrolled on specialized Marketing programme. A common feature of the postgraduate students was that they attended a Marketing course or programme, but they had a non-Marketing or IT-educational background.

Table 1. Coursepacks' launches of marketing simulations. Students enrollments (2011 – 2019).

MARKETING SIMULATIONS:	Students enrolled (numbers)		Simulation coursepacks launched (2010-2019)	
	Undergraduate	Postgraduate	Per academic year	Total years
Managing Segments and Customers	35	230	1.7	9
Using Conjoint Analysis for Business Decisions	30		1	2
Operation Management Simulation: Benihana	1	0	1	1
The Positioning Game	7	0	1	2
	<b>73</b>	<b>230</b>		

The tool primarily carried out in Postgraduates' classes was *Marketing Simulation: Managing Segments and Customers*. It had got 15 launches or appropriate 1,7 times each year between 2010 and 2019, except the academic 2012/2013. Until then the simulation exercise was proposed as an optional one. Students were supposed to select whether or not to play and report on it as an optional assignment for final exam. Since the academic 2013/2014 year the instructor set the simulation as a formal assignment of the course and students participated in it as part of the course requirements. They had to play the game successfully, to write a report and to present their best score completion. Having the Marketing Simulation as an optional one, let some students neglect learning benefits of the tool and make inconsistent decisions – to enrol and purchase but not to play the simulation. They refused participation, sometimes arguing that the Marketing course is a marginal one for them. On the other pole, there were IT-postgraduates who perceived the simulation as an experiential learning opportunity to learn about the Marketing paradigm. Most of them performed a progressive engagement with the platform. Their completions resulted in an active experimentation with the model of decision causality. *The Marketing Simulation: Using Conjoint Analysis for Business Decisions* was purposefully introduces in a Marketing Analyses course in a specialized Bachelor programme in Marketing. The experiential learning started with an initial adaptation of the comprehensive Conjoint Analysis Toolkit. The instructor predominantly integrated it into the course syllabus during the academic 2014/2015 and 2015/2016 years. But the interaction with the simulation tool itself remained as an elective assignment for final exam. The Conjoint Analysis theme within the course syllabus appeared to be highly assessed as relevant, reasonable, and practice-oriented one. Another simulation exercise launched in 2013/2014 and 2014/2015 for the purposes of Marketing Analyses course, was the *Marketing Simulation: The Positioning Game*. Only 4 students took place in the spring term of 2013/14, and on the next academic year – 3. The Positioning Game was an optional exam assignment and the students were separately instructed how to play it and what theory frame it is grounded on. It was a multi-player exercise and students in 2013/14 class ensured extra-curricular coordination. Facilitated by the instructor, a Skype connection was pre-established and the main points of the interaction

were clarified and considered. The interface was intuitively perceived with drag-and-drop pointing gestures. Students began playing with fun driven by receiving prompt performance feedback of the submitted decisions. Amazingly, the fun turned into a contest mood boosted by the applied positioning tactics.

*Marketing Simulation: Operation Management Simulation: Benihana* was carried out in the academic year of 2013/2014. It was an optional assignment for the final exam with in Services Marketing course. The student who chose to learn through that simulation approached it ambitiously. Rehearsing a couple of scenarios, she experienced 70 runs and accepted a best-practice service process with superior profit.

## 5. Conclusion

The package of the four Marketing Simulations considered above are single-player exercises, except the Positioning Game as a multi-player one, although the instructor can have the students play them in teams. All four simulations provide students with an array of tactical decisions to make and focus on marketing practice and theory. The structure of the simulations is interactive and enables multiple opportunities for self-debriefing and learning. They are flexible enough to allow students to use a variety of strategies successfully. There is no single correct solution, but the students look for the better one.

The retrospective view of the experimented experiential learning methodology in Undergraduate and Postgraduate classes studying Marketing reveals some important issues. Students need to be committed to the experiential learning paradigm. Otherwise, they would proceed pragmatically within the learning process. They have to be encouraged to demand simulation archetypes to self-debriefing. In that respect, Higher Educational Institutions should build up an adaptive infrastructure to facilitate and support both academics and students integrate software games into reciprocal academic interrelations.

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