

BUZZFEED VALENTINE: CREATING A DIGITAL MARKETING CASE STUDY

Scott Cowley, Arizona State University

TEACHING NOTES

Marketing educators face the difficult task of helping students understand, experience, and internalize the dynamic realities of the marketplace within the structured setting of a university course. While marketing educators often rely on business cases, competitive simulations, or industry consulting projects as a way to teach these market realities, each approach has its weaknesses, e.g., lack of realism, absence of risk, etc. (Pitt and Kietzmann, 2015). New digital creative platforms can equip educators with tools that overcome the shortcomings of existing approaches and give students real-world experiences, allowing them to apply an array of marketing fundamentals in a dynamic way.

One of the largest, most popular creative platforms, BuzzFeed.com, provides an ideal ground for a project that allows students to gain first-person experience and live out their own personal case study. As an overview, the BuzzFeed Valentine project has students create and publish a piece of Valentine's Day-related "clickbait" on BuzzFeed's open publishing platform. (The project can be adapted for other holidays, events, or themes.) Each student must also produce a strategic promotion plan, including the identification of relevant channels, influencers, and entities to aid diffusion. Students all publish their BuzzFeed posts on the same day, a week before Valentine's Day, and execute their promotion plans to drive at least 1,000 pageviews in a week (a high enough goal to discourage mere "click-begging" from friends). BuzzFeed's built-in author analytics provide students with real-time feedback about their own performance so that they can modify plans to reach the goal. At the conclusion of the promotion period, students assess their own campaign outcomes compared to their strategies and provide personal takeaways along with screenshots of their analytics as proof of performance.

During the introductory phase of the project, the instructor leads a discussion about consumer identity and how positive identification with products, content, and brands, leads consumers to pursue, consume, and recommend things. The instructor shows several headlines taken from BuzzFeed.com articles. The headlines adopt a "clickbait" format that targets a specific group with a catchy list or quiz that the group will identify with. An example might be "29 Things Only Girls Over 5-Foot-9 Will Understand." The class analyzes the components of the headline and discusses why it might resonate with the target audience and how changing some components such as number, tone, descriptiveness, etc. may make the headline more or less resonant. The class also discusses the merits and risks of expanding or narrowing the target audience and headline (all girls vs. girls over 6 feet) and how to consider secondary audiences (friends or relatives of tall girls). The instructor also draws attention to the need for the content to align well with the headline to elicit sharing behavior. The discussion concludes with a broader examination of how these principles are transferable to product or services marketing, advertising, or in content marketing for B2B contexts.

The next phase includes preparing students for content creation on BuzzFeed's online publishing platform. Students should spend some time browsing BuzzFeed to familiarize themselves with the writing styles and media that characterize the platform. They can read a tutorial called "A Step-By-Step Guide To Making A BuzzFeed Post" (Holderness 2014), which addresses the mechanics of using the publishing tools. Instructors should address plagiarism and media usage rights. Giving attribution to original information sources and using Creative Commons licensing are both key concerns. The instructor can also refer the students to media search engines such as Pixabay.com and Flickr.com Creative Commons search or animated GIF search engines like Giphy.com. Ultimately, the content requirement is that the BuzzFeed post can be any form (list, quiz, etc.), but must relate loosely to Valentine's Day in some way (love, relationships, flowers, etc.), must have a specific target audience, and must incorporate visual media. Students have one week to create the content and promotion plan. They are also required to develop five possible headlines to use for the post and get feedback from someone in their target audience to determine the best one to use.

Finally, to prepare students for the promotion part of the project, the instructor addresses the power of distribution channels online, identifying channels that align with the students' target audience or personal experience, and persuading gatekeepers of those channels to aid in promoting the content. BuzzFeed analytics report on traffic

from five broad channels: “seed views” (internal clicks from those already viewing BuzzFeed.com), social networks, search, links, and email/chat/apps. Many students will already be familiar with channels like social networks where they can share a link to their BuzzFeed Valentine, but they should focus on outreach to social media communities and accounts, online publishers and forums, or individual influencers that align with the target market, rather than relying on friends and relatives to reach 1,000 views. The instructor should have students read a summary of Cialdini’s (2001) six principles of persuasion and discuss how these principles each apply to promotion outreach. For example, asking for help from someone who has shared similar content aligns with the *consistency* principle, while *reciprocity* may involve sharing someone else’s content before asking for their help. The instructor can also showcase some practical free tools (with sign-up) for identifying potential outreach targets. BuzzSumo.com can aid students in finding popular, similar content, and by showing who shared that content on social networks. Followerwonk.com shows Twitter accounts with large audiences and topical relevance. OpenSiteExplorer.org shows which websites have linked to similar content in the past. If desired, the instructor can also cover some fundamentals of search engine optimization, although search is likely to be a very small proportion of overall traffic for a weeklong campaign.

Students publish their BuzzFeed Valentines a week before the holiday. Their deliverables include a link to the published post on BuzzFeed.com, the five headlines they generated, rationale for their final selection, and their promotion plan. For simplicity, the instructor provides a template for the promotion plan, which includes sections for describing the target market, distribution channels of choice, and specific outreach targets. It also asks the students to quantify the potential reach of each channel or outreach target. During the promotion period, students are welcome to modify their headlines or content in response to the market reception and analytics. At the end of the promotion period, students must submit snapshots of their analytics reports and provide a summary of their results, a thoughtful explanation of how their execution and outcomes may have deviated from their original plan, and personal takeaways.

At the conclusion of the project, the instructor should hold a debriefing session with the class, where students can talk through their experiences and the instructor can share some observations, examples, and classroom statistics. Students who recently completed this project reported a high level of engagement with creating and promoting their content. They were able to identify marketing-based sources of their successes or shortcomings and several expressed gratitude that the bar for performance was set high. Twenty percent of the project grade was based on reaching 1,000 pageviews, with partial or extra credit being awarded accordingly. Several students were able to initiate relationships with companies, leading to job offers, because of the BuzzFeed Valentine project.

BuzzFeed Valentine gives students hands-on application of market research, segmentation, targeting, and positioning (STP), consumer behavior, marketing strategy, social media, analytics, and digital marketing tools within a structured three-week format. As such, the project is adaptable for a variety of marketing courses and instructors can give added weight to particular concepts as needed. Instructors might consider adapting the project for other holidays or seasons, as a group project, or with a case study presentation component.

Project assignment sheet, promotion template, and rubric are all available at <http://www.scottcowley.com>.

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For further information contact:

Scott Cowley
Arizona State University
P.O. Box 874106
Tempe, AZ 85287-4106
(480) 965-3621
scott.cowley@asu.edu