



## The Buzzfeed Marketing Challenge: An Integrative Social Media Experience

Scott W. Cowley

To cite this article: Scott W. Cowley (2017): The Buzzfeed Marketing Challenge: An Integrative Social Media Experience, Marketing Education Review

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10528008.2017.1309981>



Published online: 20 Apr 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# THE BUZZFEED MARKETING CHALLENGE: AN INTEGRATIVE SOCIAL MEDIA EXPERIENCE

Scott W. Cowley

Haworth College of Business, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI, USA

This article presents the BuzzFeed Marketing Challenge, which helps students gain integrative real-world marketing experience by selecting a target market, then creating, publishing, and promoting an article for the target market on entertainment publisher BuzzFeed.com. The challenge is for students to effectively use marketing strategy and consumer behavior principles to generate 1,000 article views in one week. The project provides each student with a personal case study that incorporates new product development, social media, analytics, and campaign management. The BuzzFeed Marketing Challenge is highly adaptable with undergraduate marketing and online MBA students reporting a breadth of positive learning outcomes.

## CHALLENGE AND COURSE OBJECTIVES

The creation of value for a target market of customers is the central role of marketing in an organization (Kotler & Keller, 2016). For marketers to continually create value for target markets, they must develop intuition about the market's needs. For a typical student, gaining intuition through experience is impeded by limited access to resources and the lack of a real market environment where they can apply their knowledge in an integrative way. Many assignments that attempt to provide students with integrative marketing experience remain at a conceptual level, for example, creating marketing plans without executing them. This approach might be described as marketing to a target audience of one—the instructor who evaluates the assignment (rather than the target market itself).

To address this issue, the BuzzFeed Marketing Challenge (BMC) leverages a popular digital entertainment platform, BuzzFeed.com, to facilitate experiential learning and to help students internalize the integrative nature of the marketing concept (Evans, 2001). BMC is a dynamic digital marketing project where students must effectively reach a target market by publishing and promoting a piece of content on BuzzFeed.com. Students run a weeklong campaign to achieve at least 1,000 views of their content, using effective marketing strategy, consumer behavior, and

promotion principles. Students gain marketable experience with digital product development, social media, analytics, campaign management, and industry marketing tools, along with a personal case study on which to draw for their personal careers. The project is designed to achieve two curriculum objectives: help students to (a) develop their understanding of the integrative, dynamic nature of marketing strategy; and (b) realize the importance of having a strong market-oriented product and marketing plan.

## PROJECT OVERVIEW

BuzzFeed.com is an online entertainment publisher with a sizeable reach and influence among the Millennial demographic. Of more than 200 million monthly visits, 50% come from those 18 to 34 years of age (BuzzFeed.com, 2017a). Unlike most publishers, BuzzFeed allows anybody to contribute content to the website with a free BuzzFeed Community account, which provides access to BuzzFeed's content management system, where students can publish lists, quizzes, or articles, hosted on BuzzFeed.com.

BuzzFeed has four advantages over other open publishing platforms. First, BuzzFeed.com's popularity enhances student engagement and allows students to capture a portion of BuzzFeed's existing large audience for stronger performance. Second, the entertainment-driven nature of the site's content makes it easier for students to generate creative ideas. Third, publishing on BuzzFeed.com saves setup time associated with a self-hosted platform such as a blog. Fourth, BuzzFeed provides community authors with access to its real-

---

Address correspondence to Scott W. Cowley, Haworth College of Business, 3210 Schneider Hall, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI 49008. E-mail: [scott.cowley@wmich.edu](mailto:scott.cowley@wmich.edu)

**Table 1**  
**BuzzFeed Marketing Challenge Timeline, Deliverables, and Grading Breakdown**

	Instructor obligations	Student obligations
Weeks 1–2: Preparation	Deliver Mini-Lessons: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consumer behavior</li> <li>• New product development</li> <li>• Promotion and influencer outreach</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Target market research</li> <li>• BuzzFeed article creation* (25% of project grade)</li> <li>• Marketing and outreach plans* (25% of project grade)</li> </ul>
Week 3: Campaign Execution	Help resolve student campaign problems	Marketing plan execution
Week 4: Report and Discussion	Process and grade campaign results Lead class discussion	Results report*: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Written or oral results report* (25% of project grade)</li> <li>• 1,000-view content performance* (25% of project grade with partial and/or extra credit as desired)</li> </ul>

\*Deliverable.

time analytics data, allowing students to see how content is performing and view traffic sources.

### BMC TIMELINE

During the 3–4-week project, as outlined in Table 1, the instructor delivers three preparatory mini-lessons (15–20 min each) while students work on researching a target market, preparing their content, and creating marketing and influencer outreach plans. The instructor provides templates to guide students with the marketing and outreach plans (see the Appendix). Students all publish their articles on the same day and have 1 week to promote them, with the goal of generating 1,000 views per article (verified using BuzzFeed’s article analytics). After the campaign period, students report on performance and takeaways (with a written or oral report) and the instructor can lead a discussion about marketing lessons learned.

#### MINI-LESSON 1: CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

The instructor’s first priority is to help students understand the role of consumer behavior in the performance of their content. This discussion focuses on the role of identity in consumption behavior and the importance of targeting, the psychology of click-bait, and the role of emotion in generating sharing activity and viral diffusion of content.

Identity includes the many labels we accept or apply to ourselves and may include demographics, psychographics, physical attributes, lifestyle, preferences and desires, roles, or shared experiences. Our identities lead us to seek out, consume, and share information that is relevant to us (Kleine, Kleine, & Kernan, 1993). Many BuzzFeed headlines hypertarget a specific identity market. The instructor can present examples of headlines on BuzzFeed.com and lead a discussion about the identities being targeted and whether the targeting is effective.

The instructor leads a discussion about the nature of headlines in capturing interest. The effectiveness of click-bait is rooted in principles of information scarcity (Blom & Hansen, 2015). The instructor can provide different examples of how article headlines effectively or ineffectively create reader curiosity.

The role of emotion in consumption behavior is an important principle for the instructor to communicate. Content that produces high-intensity positive or negative emotions elicits greater sharing behavior (Berger & Milkman, 2012). Because the students will be motivated to reach 1,000 views, they should identify which emotional response they plan to generate. BuzzFeed displays emotion buttons people can use to describe their reactions after each article, so these can guide a discussion with students about how to target an audience with the goal of producing a specific emotion, such as a response of “LOL” or a heart emoticon.

## MINI-LESSON 2: NEW PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT

BMC gives students a sense of the full product development process in the context of digital product creation. This lesson covers the elements of new product development and how writing a BuzzFeed article should ensure fit with both the target market as well as the website. BuzzFeed.com has resources to guide students on how to create a BuzzFeed Community account and use the publishing tools (BuzzFeed.com, 2017b).

At a basic level, the instructor can address idea generation and screening, concept development, testing, refinement, and product launch (Trott, 2008). Students are likely to rely too heavily on their own opinion as sufficient market validation about what is good so plans should include getting external validation from the target market before publication. Deviation from norms of the platform can undermine reader experience, so students must familiarize themselves with BuzzFeed.com format and media conventions.

BMC also gives instructors an opportunity to talk about digital media rights. Students may feel uncertainty about which images or videos they can appropriately use in their articles, so instructors can introduce principles of Fair Use, Creative Commons licensing, and attribution. Students need to understand that just because media is digital and costless to duplicate, marketers must adhere to laws governing media usage.

## MINI-LESSON 3: PROMOTION AND INFLUENCER OUTREACH

The instruction for this lesson focuses on equipping students with an understanding of the online traffic ecosystem, tools to identify channels, communities, and individual influencers within those communities who may be good promotion outreach partners, and a theoretical framework for influencing these communities and individuals.

For each digital traffic channel, there are likely communities and influencers that may be interested in reading and sharing the student's article. Achieving the 1,000-view goal requires having a well-defined targeting plan to engage these groups in professional, but compelling ways. Using the marketing plan and outreach templates, students can articulate their target audience(s), the positioning of their article, and the value they are providing and then document outreach

targets along with justification and estimates of potential reach. Students can search sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit, along with topic forums, to find communities and individuals that fit their target market. The instructor can also introduce industry tools such as Followerwonk.com to help identify Twitter topical influencers or OpenSiteExplorer.org to identify websites that have linked to similar popular content.

BuzzFeed's analytics dashboard allows authors to see the number of page views and sources of traffic to their articles, including websites, forums, social media sites, e-mail, apps, and search engines. Students should consider all possible channels, but specifically those their target market frequents. Traffic can also come from *seed views*, which represent visitors who have navigated from other pages on BuzzFeed.com. Students should understand that analytics can be used strategically to determine whether promotion activities are having their desired effect.

The six influence principles from Cialdini (1993) can help guide students in their promotional outreach strategies. Students can understand that they already possess influence with family and friends given the liking principle. For less familiar outreach targets, students will need to be more strategic with the value they're offering. For example, the consistency principle leads people to share the same types of content they've shared previously, so students can find related articles and research who shared those as possible targets. Other influence principles include authority, reciprocity, social proof, and scarcity, which students can leverage.

## ASSESSMENT RESULTS

BMC was conducted in an undergraduate marketing strategy capstone course as well as an online master of business administration (MBA) marketing course. In the undergraduate course, BMC was a solo project, extra credit was awarded for views beyond 1,000, and content had to relate to Valentine's Day (in addition to a specific target market). In the MBA course, the project was conducted in groups of 3–4 students, no extra credit option was provided, and no content theme was specified. As shown in Table 2, MBA teams outperformed undergraduates, although some undergraduates experienced small viral effects because of individual creativity and outreach efforts.

One of the hallmarks of real-world projects is the potential for unique personal outcomes. For example, one student selected "fans of electronic dance music (EDM)" as her target market because of her personal

**Table 2**  
**BuzzFeed Marketing Challenge Web Traffic Distribution**

<b>Number of page views</b>	<b>Undergraduate marketing strategy course students (%)*</b>	<b>Online MBA marketing management course teams (%)**</b>
≥10,000	4.2	0
1,000–9,999	12.5	73.7
800–999	20.8	15.8
400–799	20.8	10.5
1–399	41.7	0
<i>M</i>	1,085.8	1,090.2
<i>SD</i>	2,360.5	305.8
Median	443.5	1053

\*24 students with extra credit for views beyond 1,000 and content had to be thematically linked to Valentine's Day.

\*\*19 student teams with no extra credit option and no content theme requirement.

interest. During her outreach to online EDM news publishers to promote her BuzzFeed post, one of them offered her a job as a freelance writer. Other students had success soliciting organizations, publishers, and influencers to share their BuzzFeed content.

Table 3 shows student open-ended feedback about learning outcomes from BMC. Outcome themes were generated using iterative categorization until information saturation was reached (Bowen 2008) and are organized by frequency and class (Sojka & Fish, 2008). The objectives of the exercise – to give students a better sense of the integrative, dynamic nature of marketing strategy as well as the importance of product-market fit – are validated in the breadth and frequency of personal learnings mentioned by students in both undergraduate and MBA courses.

Broader success of the project is borne out in the experiences of instructors at more than 25 universities who have adapted and implemented BMC in the year since its introduction. This includes Auburn University, Brigham Young University, Dartmouth College, University of Pennsylvania, and University of Rhode Island. Several students achieved viral success—being selected for BuzzFeed.com's curated home page, resulting in more than 300,000 page views in one case (Marler, 2016). Instructors also report a high level of student engagement and learning outcomes given the relevance and adaptability of the project (Metzger, 2015).

## PROJECT CHALLENGES

As with many real-world projects, BMC presents potential difficulties. The instructor's own lack of self-efficacy in guiding students through preparatory lessons, publishing, and promotion, can be mitigated as the instructor publishes and promotes his or her own BuzzFeed Community article in advance of having students do it. Instructors should also be aware that technical problems with accounts or publishing may require contacting BuzzFeed to resolve, requiring patience and flexibility. Perhaps the biggest risk is that some students, in desperation to meet the traffic goal, may resort to tactics that would be considered damaging to the marketing profession and student reputations. Desperation tactics include "click-begging" from family, friends, and celebrities on Twitter, linking to the article on irrelevant forums, using misleading headlines, and paying for clicks. Instructors can counsel students about the importance of marketing ethics, preparation, and product-market fit, while also adding explicit language or penalties to their grading policies to discourage these behaviors.

Instructors can also communicate that the mindset and approach needed for an isolated entertainment-oriented product and short-term promotional campaign is very different from the experience of building a successful long-term marketing program or other marketing objectives. Nevertheless, students will respect the multitude of principles, skills, tools, market groups, and environmental factors in effect that must be considered for the project.

## ADAPTATION

Instructors have demonstrated a broad range of adaptations for BMC. It has successfully been implemented at universities in undergraduate and graduate courses (in-person and online), as individual and team assignments, with written and oral reports, and with or without a joint focus (such as a holiday, event, or social issue). Instructors in marketing strategy, digital marketing and social media, consumer behavior, advertising, integrated marketing communications and even communications and writing courses have all successfully adapted the project and corresponding materials (Marler, 2016; Metzger, 2015). The project could be

**Table 3**  
**Student Self-Reported Learning Outcomes From the BuzzFeed Marketing Challenge**

Learning outcome theme	Undergraduate students mentioning theme (%)	Online MBA teams mentioning theme (%)
Challenge of promotion and competing for visibility using social media	45.8	26.3
Importance of product-market fit (segmentation, positioning, audience research)	41.7	57.9
Importance of credibility/familiarity with channels/communities of interest	37.5	63.2
Importance of distribution channel selection	37.5	52.6
Importance/challenge of engaging online influencers	33.3	42.1
Importance of contingency planning/responding dynamically to market performance	29.2	47.4
Influence of externalities on market timing, speed of diffusion	16.7	52.6
Increased self-efficacy in generating product demand	16.7	10.5
Challenge of market selection and size considerations	12.5	21.1
Importance of using data/analytics in decision making	12.5	26.3
Importance of consumer behavior in marketing success	4.2	21.1
Importance of team coordination of effort	—	21.1

\*24 students with extra credit awarded for views beyond 1,000 and content had to be thematically linked to Valentine's Day.

\*\*19 student teams with no extra credit option and no content theme requirement.

further adapted by using some other open content platform, such as YouTube for video.

In summary, the BMC brings a scalable real-world integrative experience to the marketing classroom in a way that empowers students to directly engage with a target market through the product development and promotions processes. As students learn to adapt to market needs in a dynamic environment, they will be better equipped with skills and tools for effective and ethical marketing careers.

## REFERENCES

- Berger, J., & Milkman, K. L. (2012). What makes online content viral? *Journal of Marketing Research*, 49(2), 192–205. doi:10.1509/jmr.10.0353
- Blom, J. N., & Hansen, K. R. (2015). Click bait: Forward-reference as lure in online news headlines. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 76, 87–100. doi:10.1016/j.pragma.2014.11.010
- Bowen, G. A. (2008). Naturalistic inquiry and the saturation concept: A research note. *Qualitative Research*, 8(1), 137–152. doi:10.1177/1468794107085301
- BuzzFeed.com (2017a). *Custom content worth sharing*. 2017, March 15. Retrieved from <https://www.buzzfeed.com/advertise>
- BuzzFeed.com (2017b). *Help /how do I use BuzzFeed?* 2017, March 15. Retrieved from [https://www.buzzfeed.com/help/how\\_to\\_use](https://www.buzzfeed.com/help/how_to_use)
- Cialdini, R. B. (2008). *Influence: Science and practice*. Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Evans, J. R. (2001). The emerging role of the Internet in marketing education: From traditional teaching to technology-based education. *Marketing Education Review*, 11(3), 1–14. doi:10.1080/10528008.2001.11488753
- Kleine, R. E., Kleine, S. S., & Kernan, J. B. (1993). Mundane consumption and the self: A social-identity perspective. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 2(3), 209–238. doi:10.1016/S1057-7408(08)80015-0
- Kotler, P., & Keller, K. L. (2016). *Marketing management*. Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Marler, A. (2016). Generating buzz: One viral post at a time. *Marriott Alumni Magazine*. 9–9. 2017, March 15. Retrieved from <http://marriottschool.uberflip.com/i/687486-summer-2016>
- Metzger, B. (2015). *Students take academics to BuzzFeed*. 2017, March 15. Retrieved from <http://rhodycigar.com/2015/10/29/buzzfeed-classes>
- Sojka, J. Z., & Fish, M. S. (2008). Brief in-class role plays: An experiential teaching tool targeted to generation Y students. *Marketing Education Review*, 18(1), 25–31. doi:10.1080/10528008.2008.11489021
- Trott, P. (2008). *Innovation management and new product development*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Financial Times Prentice Hall.

## APPENDIX

### Example Marketing and Outreach Plans and Results Report Requirements

Marketing Plan	
<b>Title: “17 X-Men Valentines For The Superhero In Your Life”</b> <b>URL: <a href="http://www.buzzfeed.com/keelyflaherty/xoxoxmen">http://www.buzzfeed.com/keelyflaherty/xoxoxmen</a></b>	
My inspiration for the post was. . .	I loved the most recent X-Men movie and have seen lots of friends excited about it
My target audience is. . .	Primary: People who like X-Men or have a significant other who likes X-Men Secondary: Comic book lovers, people who hate X-Men, people who like cheesy humor
My selling proposition is. . .	Multiple unique, funny, visual, X-men–related Valentines
Emotion(s) I plan to elicit. . .	“LOL,” “CUTE,” “FTW”
People will share this content because. . .	People want visual ways to show love that aligns with their preferences; digital images make these easy to link or e-mail.
They may not share it because. . .	It doesn’t have their favorite X-Men, they don’t like X-Men, they dislike pun-based humor, design quality wasn’t good enough
My strategy to maximize product-market fit included. . .	Examples of market testing: audience/market research, pre-launch feedback from target market, identification of similar successful content, secondary data (be specific)
An example of successful content with the same target market is. . .	<a href="http://www.buzzfeed.com/perpetua/94-x-men-members-ranked-from-worst-to-best">http://www.buzzfeed.com/perpetua/94-x-men-members-ranked-from-worst-to-best</a> (34,042 total shares through social media)

Example Outreach Plan			
Distribution channel or influencer	Target justification and preparation notes	Raw audience size	Actual reach (est.)
<a href="http://twitter.com/dyfl">http://twitter.com/dyfl</a>	Comic editor, shared X-Men-related humor in the past. Contact ahead of time to pitch and gauge interest.	4,200	60
<a href="http://www.reddit.com/r/xmen">http://www.reddit.com/r/xmen</a>	Active community devoted to X-Men. Easy link share, but should participate in the community in advance. Reddit may not like BuzzFeed content.	19,400	300
<a href="http://comicvine.gamespot.com/forums/x-men-155">http://comicvine.gamespot.com/forums/x-men-155</a>	X-Men-related forum that appears to be active. Hard part will be getting people to click on a forum thread then click on a link to the BuzzFeed post.	Unknown; threads get 20+ views	100
<a href="http://www.facebook.com/xmenfanspage">http://www.facebook.com/xmenfanspage</a>	Lots of fans, but hasn’t posted in a while. Try contacting.	26,000	200

### Results Report Requirements

- Total page views during the promotion window.
- Paragraph executive summary of how the execution of the promotion plan went and overall outcomes.
  - What went most according to plan.
  - Anything you didn’t expect (positive or negative).
  - How you adjusted your plan during the campaign.
- Description of any other personal takeaways about marketing during the campaign. (Could be related to product-market fit, consumer behavior and influence, campaign management, channel promotion, etc.).
- Screenshots of the results, including cumulative and non-cumulative traffic and traffic sources.