

Students write short advertisements to convey benefits of Google Online Marketing Challenge

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University marketing students prefer experiential learning through competitions, internships, live authentic projects, and student businesses. The Google Online Marketing Challenge, the largest global student competition, has attracted over 30,000 students from 700 universities across 70 countries since its launch in 2008. Academics have researched various aspects of the Challenge quantitatively and qualitatively with closed and open-ended questions but no researcher has as yet asked students to express their learning of online marketing through the AdWords format, a core element of the Challenge that requires student teams to craft three lines of advertising texts within specific character counts to convey key messages of their clients. This paper adopts a unique approach to provide insights into the Challenge by asking students to promote the Challenge through the AdWords format. A questionnaire was sent to 38 participants of the Challenge in 2009, with 19 respondents writing 60 advertising texts to convey benefits of the Challenge to attract more students, academics, and clients to participate in the Challenge. Central themes that emerged were Google-trained work-ready students with real marketing-business skills and a challenged mindset. The process of writing short three-line advertisements to express core learning has implications for theory and practice.

Keywords: experiential learning, Google Online Marketing Challenge, work-ready students

Introduction

University marketing students prefer experiential learning through competitions, field site visits, internships, live projects, real-world authentic learning, and student-operated businesses (Hamer, 2000; Kennedy, Lawton and Walker, 2001; Reeves, Herrington, and Oliver, 2002; Karns, 2005; Lombardi, 2007; Doren and Corrigan, 2008; Ling, 2008).

The current 'hot' topic in marketing education is the Google Online Marketing Challenge, a competitive live project that has attracted 30,000 students from 700 universities across 70 countries since its launch in 2008 (<http://www.google.com/onlinechallenge/>).

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The Google Challenge is unique in many ways. Students form teams, search for a client and obtain an online marketing brief, propose a campaign strategy for AdWords or keyword-based advertising to promote the client's goods or services to various audiences, create the advertisements (three lines of short texts within space limitations plus the URL of the advertised website), choose the media network, plan how to use the US\$200 sponsored by Google, monitor the LIVE campaign over three weeks, analyse the campaign results provided by Google, reflect on what strategies work or do not work, improve the campaign keywords, advertisements, media, or budget to achieve online marketing goals, and write a post-campaign report.

Throughout the Google Challenge process, student teams learn almost independently from vast resources provided by Google – the website, the AdWords Learning Center, the student guide, the Challenge Forum, the Google Team online helpline, and YouTube video seminars. Some academics conduct online marketing classes while other professors arrange for team presentations to share ideas, invite clients along, and run an internal mini-competition among teams (Murphy, Tuzovic, Ling, Doane, & Mullen, 2009). The researcher has been guided by Kolb's experiential learning theory to embed the Challenge as an alternative assignment in an Integrated Marketing Communications unit, with students immersed in Kolb's experience-reflect-think-act model (Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2008) throughout the two phases of the Challenge (Ling, 2008).

The Google Challenge has attracted researchers who have collected data through closed and open-ended questions and published quantitative and qualitative findings on benefits to students, academics, and clients. However, there is no academic paper yet on getting students to express their learning of online marketing through the short three-line advertisement format, which is core to the Google Challenge AdWords system. It is the researcher's belief that just as three lines of advertisements can convey attractive benefits of the client's goods or services to attract online searchers to the client's website, getting students to write three lines of advertisements to attract more participants to the Google Challenge can reveal key learning benefits of students who have participated in the Challenge. This approach aligns with Kolb's theory that learning experiences facilitate knowledge creation (Kolb, 1984).

This paper aims to uncover in a creative way student learning through the Google Challenge. The research question is 'What key benefits would Google Challenge participants write in three-line advertisements to attract more students, academics, and clients to participate in the Challenge?' The following sections of this paper cover a brief review of literature on experiential learning and the Google Challenge, the research methodology, detailed findings, and then discussion on findings and implications.

Literature

Tertiary marketing students prefer dynamic experiential learning (Kolb, 1984; Kolb and Kolb, 2005). In the context of learning through competitions and live projects, many research studies have supported Kolb's experiential learning theory, for example, Petkus (2000), Stutts and West (2003), Luck and Chalmers (2007), Rundle-Thiele and Kuhn (2008), Zabkar (2008), Ling (2008), and Young (2010).

There have been numerous conference and journal papers on how students have benefited from the global live competition of the Google Challenge. Several researchers analysed

survey responses from students, academics, and clients who had participated in the inaugural Challenge (Jansen, Hudson, Hunter, Liu, and Murphy, 2008; Neale, Treiblmaier, Vani Henderson, Hunter, Hudson, and Murphy, 2009; Flaherty, Jansen, Hofacker, and Murphy, 2009; Treiblmaier, Neale, and Murphy, 2009; Lavin, Van Alstine, Scott, Oliver and Murphy, 2009). In addition, Ling (2008) discussed the perspectives of marketing communications students who had participated in the Challenge; Rosso, Jansen, and Fleming (2009) wrote about their experiences incorporating the Challenge in a Master of Business Administration Management Information System course; and Lavin (2010) analysed Google Challenge team reports in Internet Marketing classes.

At least three papers have highlighted the significance of AdWords, Google's text-based online advertising system that is central to the Challenge, and the unique AdWords advertisements that are crafted over three lines with a maximum of 25 characters for the headline and 35 characters per line for the next two lines (Jansen et al., 2008; Murphy, Hudson, Hunter, and Neale, 2009; Flaherty et al., 2009). These AdWords advertisements convey keywords of goods or services that appeal to specific audiences and may appear as sponsored links when people type in keywords during their online search. However, no research at this stage has used the AdWords advertisement format as empirical data to gauge learning through the Challenge. Hence, this paper contributes to the Challenge literature by focusing on AdWords advertisements that serve as 'voices' for student learning through the global competition.

Methodology

A qualitative research approach guided the collection of Adwords-written data and the analysis for themes in order to understand experiences of participants (Creswell, 2005). Instead of closed-ended and open-ended questions on a questionnaire (Creswell, 2005), data collection followed the open-ended questionnaire technique whereby Google participants were asked to express key learning benefits in the form of AdWords, which allows abbreviation of words. Gathering data about key benefits of the Challenge through the AdWords format is consistent with Kolb's experiential learning theory where knowledge is both adaptive and transformative (Kolb, 1984). Hence, the AdWords format enables Google participants to adapt their skills in crafting advertisements for their clients and transforming their learning experiences into advertisements that crystallise the benefits of the Challenge.

A questionnaire was sent to 38 Edith Cowan University participants of the Google Online Marketing Challenge in 2009 asking students to craft three-line AdWords advertisements (minus the website address) to attract students, academics, and clients to participate in the Challenge. There were 19 returns of the questionnaire, with seven of eight postgraduates and 12 of 30 undergraduates returning the survey. The participants came from different countries, cultures, and learning specialisations, such as Advertising, Creative Services, Marketing, and Public Relations. Altogether, the respondents crafted 21 advertisements to attract students, 19 for academics, and 20 for clients.

The 60 advertisements were analysed for codes or concepts, sometimes with 'in vivo codes' or actual words of the participants (Creswell, 2005, p. 238). The various codes under each audience category were encapsulated into themes and the emerging themes across the three audience categories were compared for approximate connections to arrive at a core concept (Creswell, 2005). Although this was a qualitative research study, the frequently-discussed codes (Creswell, 2005) helped to develop a learning theory from the AdWords data.

The research process adhered to the criteria of trustworthiness in qualitative research – Dependability, Credibility, Confirmability, and Transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). There was Dependability or consistency in the research procedure (Wolcott, 2004) through rigorous data collection and analysis. There was Credibility through diversity of participants (Tobin & Begley, 2004) and accurate or authentic data collection (Lincoln & Guba, 2000), as participants had voiced their perceptions of key learning in the same AdWords format. There was Confirmability through an ‘audit trail’ of data collection, data analysis, and data reporting (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). There was Transferability through a fairly ‘thick description’ of research method and findings to enable other Google Challenge researchers to evaluate the transferability of the findings to their situations (Lincoln & Guba, 2000).

Findings

The key themes from the advertisements were:

- ‘challenging’, ‘career preparation’, ‘real’, ‘winning’, and ‘marketing skills’ (advertisements aimed at students)
- ‘engaging students’, ‘real’, ‘career preparation’, and ‘marketing skills’ (advertisements targeting academics)
- ‘free’, ‘student resources’, ‘business benefits’, ‘community engagement’, and ‘real’ (client-focused advertisements)

Advertisements for students

While the advertisements naturally included the name of the competition (Google Challenge was mentioned 12 times) and the AdWords format (used seven times), students revealed the uniqueness of the Google Challenge as ‘challenging’, ‘career preparation’, ‘real’, ‘winning’, and ‘marketing skills’.

‘Challenging’ was conveyed 14 times through the following keywords:

- ‘test your online marketing skills’
- ‘take part in the challenge’
- ‘challenge’
- ‘compete against teams from all over the world’
- ‘become part of a worldwide challenge’
- ‘show the world what you can do now’
- ‘compete now’
- ‘take the chance’
- ‘Challenge yourself’
- ‘A Challenge for you!’
- ‘once in a lifetime challenge’
- ‘a timeless opportunity’
- ‘Are you the best?’
- ‘Are you Google enough?’

‘Career preparation’ came through nine times from keywords in the advertisements:

- ‘Competitive edge’
- ‘Work with Google at uni’
- ‘Get ahead with Google’
- ‘something that employers die for’
- ‘get a head start’
- ‘be a pro and your own boss’

- ‘Add a star to your resume’
- ‘magic when finding a job’
- ‘increase your marketing potential’

‘Real’ was expressed nine times through keywords such as:

- ‘real client’ (three times)
- ‘real-world training’
- ‘real-world marketing’
- ‘real-life experience’ (twice)
- ‘real business of your choice’
- ‘Market for real’

‘Winning’ was communicated eight times through:

- ‘Win a trip to SF’
- ‘Cool prizes up for grabs!’
- ‘be rewarded’
- ‘Get \$200’
- ‘win a trip to the Google Head Office’
- ‘Win a trip overseas’
- ‘Got to be in it to win it’
- ‘Can you win the Google Challenge?’

‘Marketing skills’ was written seven times through such keywords:

- ‘online marketing skills’
- ‘Google’s online marketing techniques’
- ‘Marketing skills’
- ‘Frontline of Marketing’
- ‘Marketing Tool’
- ‘Marketing Experience’
- ‘Learn marketing from the experts’

Table 1 shows some of the student-recruitment advertisements that reflect keywords such as challenging, career preparation, real, winning, and marketing.

Table 1: Advertisements to attract students to take part in the Google Challenge

| | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Get a career headstart! Be a part of the Google Challenge Do something employers die for! | Get ahead with Google! Real-world Marketing experience for Students. Check it out online NOW! |
| A Challenge for You! Timeless opportunity for real life Experience! Check out Google now! | Work with Google at Uni! An assignment different to the rest! Hands-on experience with Google NOW |

Advertisements for academics

Students focused on ‘engaging students’, ‘real’, ‘career preparation’, and ‘Marketing skills’.

‘Engaging students’ was manifested 15 times through:

- ‘Motivate Your Students’
- ‘Engage your classes today’
- ‘Beyond Classroom Experience’

- ‘exciting experience’
- ‘Encourage students’
- ‘No more sleepy students’
- ‘Make a difference’
- ‘Become part of a new educational era’
- ‘Give your students the chance’
- ‘Let your students take part’
- ‘Let your students apply what they’ve learned’
- ‘Show your students how it’s done’
- ‘Show your students your prof style’
- ‘Make it part of the course’
- ‘Embed the Challenge in your course now!’

‘Real’ was explicitly written eight times through:

- ‘How real do you teach?’
- ‘real online marketing competition’
- ‘real client’
- ‘real experience’
- ‘real world experience’
- ‘real world project’
- ‘real campaign’
- ‘real professional’

‘Career preparation’ was mentioned six times through:

- ‘Help students reach their potential’
- ‘Lead young minds to success’
- ‘Prepare your students for the business world’
- ‘Watch your students becoming professionals’
- ‘Give students professional edge’
- ‘Give your students a real professional life experience’

‘Marketing skills’ was expressed four times through:

- ‘online marketing competition’
- ‘Live Marketing Competition’
- ‘Marketing Teacher’
- ‘professionals in Online Marketing’

Table 2 shows some of the academic-recruitment advertisements that reflect keywords such as engaging, real, career preparation, and marketing.

Table 2: Advertisements to recruit academics to take part in the Google Challenge

| | |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| New educational era! Prepare students for business world Take part in the Google Challenge! | Students win with Google! Join the Google Marketing Challenge & give students professional edge! |
| Beyond classroom teaching Let students gain real experience Priceless lessons through AdWords | Make a REAL difference! Give students REAL professional Life experience. Visit GOMC now! |

Advertisements for clients

The overwhelming keyword in the advertisements for clients is ‘free’ (mentioned 24 times). The respondents emphasized free online advertising (seven times), free AdWords (five times), and free online marketing (five times), with fewer mentions of free \$200, free campaign for three weeks, free publicity, and free student labour.

The second theme was ‘student resources’, with 10 keywords on:

- ‘students market your business’
- ‘students do it for free’
- ‘let young minds lead your business to success’
- ‘take on a team’
- ‘they do all the work for you’
- ‘students will benefit your company’
- ‘Let students create’
- ‘work with students’
- ‘24h student support’
- ‘recruit with our challengers Now!’

Respondents were also conscious of the ‘business benefits’ of the Google Challenge, with nine keywords on:

- ‘market your business’
- ‘Give your business a golden opportunity’
- ‘lead your business to success’
- ‘Help your business’
- ‘website traffic will increase immediately’
- ‘Expand your business’
- ‘Promote your business’
- ‘manage your business’
- ‘real ROI’

Some advertisements appealed to community engagement, with six keywords such as:

- ‘Is business more than just profits to you?’
- ‘Give something back today’
- ‘Help Students, Help Your Business’
- ‘Uni needs businesses’
- ‘Students need your help’
- ‘Provide students the opportunity’

‘Real’ was not a factor when students created the advertisements to attract clients, as there were only two mentions – ‘real online advertising’ and ‘real ROI’.

Table 3 shows some of the client-recruitment advertisements that reflect keywords such as free, resources, business benefits, community, and real.

Table 3: Advertisements to recruit clients to take part in the Google Challenge

| | |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Want \$200 FREE advertising? Expand your business for FREE! Join the Google Challenge today! | Help students & business! Gain free advertising for 21 days! Great exposure without charge! |
| Try Google AdWords FREE! Become part of the Google Challenge Students will benefit your company! | Free online Marketing! Work with students & get FREE ads! Google Online Marketing Challenge! |

Summarising the themes from the advertisements for students, academics, and clients, Table 4 shows the connections of emerging themes.

**Table 4 – Connectedness of learning themes from the advertisements
(with number of times themes were mentioned)**

| Student ads /Themes | Academics ads/Themes | Clients ads/Themes |
|-------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| Challenging (14) Google Challenge (12) | Engaging Students (15) | Community Engagement (6) |
| Career Preparation (9) | Career Preparation (6) | Student Resources (10) |
| Real (9) | Real (8) | Real (2) |
| Winning (8) | - | Free (24) |
| Marketing Skills (7) | Marketing Skills (4) | Business Benefits (9) |

The interconnected themes (Creswell, 2005) from the three categories of AdWords texts are:

- Challenging/Google Challenge (26 mentions)
- Career Preparation/Student Resources (25 mentions)
- Community Engagement/Engaging Students (21 mentions)
- Marketing Skills/Business Benefits (20 mentions)
- Real (19 mentions)

These interconnected themes seem to illustrate the proposition that Google, as part of community engagement, helps students to be work-ready through the Google Challenge. Hence, the proposition from the three-line AdWords advertisements written by students can be summed up as: Google trains work-ready students with real marketing skills, business knowhow, and a take-on-the-challenge philosophy. The following advertisement written by the researcher synthesises the benefits of engaging in the Google Challenge:

Work-ready through Google

Real Marketing & Business Skills!
Real Clients! Google Challenge!

Conclusion

The study re-affirms that tertiary marketing students prefer experiential learning through competitions and live projects, especially in recent years through the Google Online Marketing Challenge. Collecting empirical data through three-line advertisements written by students aligned with the Google AdWords system and was a creative way to get students to create knowledge as part of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) to express key learning

benefits of the Challenge. The AdWords format helped participants crystallise their thinking on key benefits of the Challenge. In essence, the real project-based Google Challenge grooms students to be work-ready with job skills and a challenging philosophy. While only 19 participants had written 60 AdWords over three categories, it is likely that this finding can be transferred to other Google Challenge participants in other settings because the Challenge does help participants to be more employable with AdWords skills. The 'work-ready' proposition also supports employability literature on the importance of skills and personal attributes (Curtis & McKenzie, 2001). From a policy perspective, it may be useful to embed the Google Challenge in more marketing and advertising courses to help more students to be Google-trained and employable.

Further research could focus on employability of Google participants: To what extent has the Google Challenge experience helped participants in finding similar marketing or advertising jobs while at university or after graduation? Further research could also examine how many Google Challenge participants have progressed to working in the AdWords industry. Writing short three line advertisements could also be applied in job applications, where marketing graduates sell their unique selling propositions in a few words to get prospective employers to act quickly!

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