



Nancy Stephens (Arizona State University) provides an experienced user's perspective on LINKS.



How are you using LINKS?

I have a breadth of experience in LINKS for the past two years in all kinds of formats, which might distinguish me among all the people who use LINKS. I've done it in front of all kinds of audiences; in person, in a class, all on-line, Exec MBA students, Evening MBA Students, and Executives. I always use LINKS Services Marketing.

Nancy Stephens I always do Services Marketing rather than Services Management, because I don't want to overwhelm them with too many decisions. And by the time we are two-thirds of the way into Services Marketing they tell me they wish they could do Services Management because they would like to have more control, more decisions especially over the CSRs. If I gave them the full simulation, I don't think they would be happy. It would be way beyond the scope of the course. They want that control. They really get into it more and more and more, and the fact that they want more control is a strong indicator of that.

Describe your typical students.

These are all Marketing Management courses, and a lot of times these are the only marketing courses these students will take in their lifetimes. I teach working professionals and they are going to school at nights and on weekends. A lot of them are engineers, and people who never had a business degree. They don't want to focus in Marketing and so they have this one course. So this is it, this is our chance to get across the principles of Marketing to future business leaders. I have never offered this class to undergraduates. All of my remarks are limited to MBA students.

What is your typical class size?

Each class is around 40 people. I have almost exclusively teams of four, and perhaps a few teams of five. Four is the ideal number, three isn't enough and with five somebody can be a free rider. So I want to prevent the free riders. I don't think there is as much free riding in the LINKS Simulation as a group project compared to all other group projects because they all get so into it and they all want to win.

Do you think a competitive environment helps?

Yes, I think a competitive environment helps because it provides motivation. They really want to beat their competitive teams. In fact in my class I think they are almost too oriented to competition at the cost of being oriented sometimes to the customer. I tell them the most important thing is you have to have a very attractive service design but they are concerned with "my competitor

this, and my competitor that..." They just get really cranked up about competitors and market share. And certainly, market share is one of the most important criteria, but it's not the only one, and its not heavily weighted.

What response have you gotten from your students?

The simulation itself...my students love it. They just love it. I was just having coffee with one of my students. He was a supply chain major in undergraduate school. He said he just loves the simulation because it makes marketing real to him. I think another huge benefit is that it takes advantage of the MBA students natural bent toward competitiveness. I have taught MBAs for 20 years and they just have a competitive gene that the rest of us may not have so I think those two reasons, it's really competitive and makes the course come alive in a way that sitting in a lecture or doing a case just doesn't.

What's so valuable about LINKS is that you have to balance in the same way that you do in the real world. You can't just game it, or go for one thing. You really have to consider factors that are often at odds with each other--trade offs such as market share and net income.

Do the students just seem to get it from the start?

No, they don't get it from the start. The benefits accrue immediately to those people who take the time to read the manual. We're on about the 4th or 5th week now and a lot of the students are so funny. They tell me "you need to tell the students to read that manual." Because I don't see myself as 'Mom', and I don't say "You guys need to read that. Don't forget to read that." I say "It's important to read the manual." End of story. The ones who don't listen find themselves behind the eight ball. I always think that is a pretty good way to go at it. It's a pretty good way to distinguish people in the real world too. People who prepare, who are quick on the uptake, who try to figure out what's going on and learn more about it. Those are qualities that are very beneficial in the business world. I think it's OK for me to do what I do and say "Read the manual." and not coax them all the time.

When the students catch on, what happens?

The students quickly figure out ways that work for them. Forecasting is the biggest problem for them. That's pretty realistic. It's hard to forecast in the real world. That's what is interesting about teaching these particular students. They are working in banks, Intel Corp., Honeywell, and a lot of companies like that. It makes marketing real for them. They come into this world thinking that marketing is advertising. But any service enterprise would say that it involves the people decisions, the physical evidence decisions, and marketing is a much bigger thing than just the message and pricing.

Is there a reoccurring topic that comes up regularly?

The students always ask "what is the service? We need to know what the service is." I recently mentioned this to Randy and he sent me a great slide deck that's going to solve that problem. I really don't want to tell them. I agree with Randy's idea about that. I tell the students just focus on the data because that's what you are always going to have--data.

Do your students order the research and do they find that it helps?

I don't think they would order it as widely as they do if I didn't encourage them. So when I introduce LINKS, I talk about some of the different research reports and show them examples and encourage them to order. Then I think they quickly figure out the reports that they find useful and the reports they don't. I tell them, "Some of these are going to be good and some of them aren't. You figure it out." And I also tell them that teams that use research do better because knowledge is expensive and ignorance is more expensive. They see the teams that don't order the research are behind the 8-ball immediately. That's how you figure out what service design you should offer. I encourage them to order a lot of research.

Your students have a high participation rate in the LINKS Benchmarking Survey. How do you encourage this?

I do look at the overall results from the benchmarking survey. I get tons of feedback from my students.

I think what you are seeing is my focus on customer service and feedback in general. I tell my students they are customers, they are paying \$40-45,000 to be there. A lot of people don't think of students as customers but I do because they have money and they have choice. They don't have to come to us. So I really have them so cranked up about customer focus and feedback that at the end of the course I am not surprised that they give feedback. They give me a lot of feedback. I really, really encourage it. In the middle of the course I give them a form for feedback, and then I put it up on a power point and show them what they said. I promote the idea of feedback. I tell them that the complaining customer is your friend—because you get to solve the problem. That might be what I do that really primes them to co-operate in the Benchmarking Survey and give their feedback. I tell the students about Randy. I use his name. I say that this simulation was prepared by Randy Chapman and Ruth Bolton, who used to be on our faculty. I tell them I send emails to Randy. I think it makes them feel that somebody is actually going to read their input.

I have the same attitude toward feedback that Randy has--he acts and reacts once he gets some feedback. That's really a strong, strong value of Arizona State University. The only suggestion that I would make to Randy on that survey is to make room for open-ended comments because my students really have a lot of them to make. I think that survey is a bit frustrating to them because it doesn't give them a chance to say anything.

Going through the LINKS experience produces a lot of angst. My students desire at the end to make comments and do a lot of decompressing. I do that for presentations on the last night, but I also tell them, write down your feedback, email it to me and I'll send it to Randy, and I often do. I think it would be even better if it didn't have to go through me. They might want to say something they would not send to me. I hate to be gatekeeper to them. I believe in blunt feedback. I think it's a very good thing. I couldn't agree more with Randy.

Have your teaching evaluations changed since you began using LINKS Simulation?

My teaching evaluations have gone up since I started using LINKS. I think it appeals to working MBAs--working professionals. At the end of every class we are required to offer the students the opportunity to evaluate the course and the instructor. And those evaluations are extremely important to each of our individual professional futures because we want our professors to be good teachers. It's my job performance. So my students perceptions of my job performance have increased greatly since I started using the LINKS Simulation. Despite the fact that I would change some of the interfaces, everybody loves the way it runs.

This simulation has put everything together for me in teaching this class. It has really made it so enjoyable for me and for the students. I could be a sales rep for this probably. I think it's really a great simulation and I am pretty sure that my students are more engaged and learning a lot more about marketing than before I used this simulation. I would like to help Randy get this in more schools because it really is good for the students. The way that the LINKS Simulation runs, I can't say enough about how good it is and how much my students love it. I don't have anybody who just doesn't love it. I teach executive MBAs over the winter...we start in the middle of November, we have another class in December then we take four weeks off. And then we have three classes...its a weird schedule...the point is, the last year when I taught this I started the simulation after the first of the year because I thought this will just be too disjointed. And they practically demanded...they said "now next year you are going to have to start this before Christmas. The students are going to want to do this. They are going to want to get into this." I almost think the students could do testimonials. They really like it. Please use all this stuff, I hope Randy sells a ton of simulations and I think it will make people better marketers and it will focus on the right things.

Do you have anything more you would like to add?

Another thing that is really, really good about this simulation is Randy is "Mr. Responsive". When you have any kind of issue or problem, I am amazed at how fast he gets back to you and how responsive he is. I ran another simulation and they were pretty good, but you had to call their office and they didn't work on the weekend. Randy is "Mr. Responsive" and that's so important when you are faced with a problem with your simulation. It means everything that you get an e-mail response on a Friday night or the weekend. I think Randy offers service that no other simulation company offers. He has a great product and I am honored to be asked about it.