



Elten Briggs (University of Texas at Arlington) will teach with the LINKS Services Marketing Simulation for the first time starting later this month.



Elten Briggs

Did you complete a Train-The-Trainer session, or use the simulation yourself? Was there anything that stumped you or gave you different results or problems other than what you expected?

I did complete the Train-The-Trainer and participated in the 4-round simulation. The first few decisions took more time than I expected, to really review the data and output. I was pretty impressed with the complexity of LINKS and the actual variables that you have to consider to make a sound decision. I was surprised but pleased because I want my students to have to rely on one another and want it to be a challenge for them. I had to make all of the decisions myself. But, I was in a simulation without actual real competitors so I didn't get the "I wonder that they are going to do?" side of things but I did get a feel for evaluating the research studies and seeing what would happen if you make some changes.

Do you have any concerns about using the LINKS simulation in your course?

It seems to be a pretty easy set up but I have a concern about my students paying on time. This is the first time I have added a paid component other than the textbook in the course, so I am wondering how they will respond to that. They are Master's students so I think that won't be a big issue. Also before I get into the class, I am not sure of the background of my students, so I worry about some of the students not being able to interpret some of the financials. I am hoping that they have done a fundamental level of core classes by the time they get into my class because mine is an elective course.

There are tutorials on the website so some of those things will be covered for the students. I think that the neat thing about this simulation is that you have to use these financial reports to make some strategic decisions. That may not be something the students are comfortable with doing especially if they do not have management experience. I have tried to build some flexibility into the course so that if I find there is a lack of understanding I can allow for more time to go into it with them.

As a first time user do you have specific criteria in mind that will determine if the simulation is successful and beneficial in achieving your academic goals?

I am going to be listening to students throughout the simulation. I want to see if they are able to apply some of the core services concepts we are talking about in the class—how effectively they are going to do that. By doing this simulation, do they have a better understanding of a balanced scorecard approach?....do they have a better understanding of the challenges of managing demand and capacity in services marketing?...some of the core concepts we are covering—service design, and the drivers of service quality and at the end of the simulation are they going to be able to connect the dots more effectively. That is going to be the ultimate test of whether this is a success or not.

What questions do you think the students will ask once the simulation process is explained?

I think the students are going to have a number of questions about managing the simulation interacting with the interface and after I tell them to go back to the manual a few times, those questions will stop.

I am going to get some questions regarding the Key Performance indicators, I think. One thing that arose as I was working through the simulation...I was looking at my output for Customer Satisfaction which was a bit below industry standards, but looking at my services they were rated higher than their counterparts. It looked like the main reason that my satisfaction was a bit lower was because I had introduced a new service that had very low satisfaction scores. So, I thought to myself, how is this satisfaction score calculated? Is it just a rough average across here or is it actually weighted by units purchased? So I think going into it there are going to be a lot of questions on how some of the numbers and measures in LINKS are generated.

One of the big things that I dropped the ball on when I was doing the simulation was the research studies. I just kind of skimmed over a couple of the research studies, I found out later, in order for them to make sense I needed to benchmark against a current configuration, or a current product concept that I was already using.

Those were some little surprises that you come back and say “if I had read that a little more carefully I would have picked that up beforehand.”

What benefits do you hope to achieve when using this large-scale simulation in your Services Marketing course?

I hope that this simulation will help enhance some of the discussion that we are going to be having in class anyway about some of the core service marketing concepts. I envision situations where we talk about concepts and I’ll reference LINKS as “OK, this is like in LINKS where you did X, Y, or Z”; or “what in LINKS is similar to this?” The final projects that I am doing, they have to relate the course marketing concepts to decisions that they made or strategies they implemented in LINKS.

This gives me something really practical in the university environment. I’ve had a couple of cases where I have had to deal with projects that were shady in some ways. I’d go and “Google” and found that they had pasted large portions of their projects from websites. I really got tired of dealing with that.

With the LINKS approach, the possibility of me dealing with that sort of thing is going to be much lower. To me that’s a key benefit because it really enhances my teaching experience not have to deal with the stress of a situation like that popping up.

One more major benefit for this LINKS experience is that it gives me something that is very practical that I can use as a background to the entire course. Often times you have a course projects and the entire course builds up towards the completion of the course project and I really like for my courses to have a sense of cohesion in that way and LINKS provides me with that cohesion.

Will students working together in groups be a positive or negative experience?

I think it will be positive. I have always been a proponent of group work. Back when I was taking my Master's program, my professor had very few individual assignments and he went with 80-85% group approach. I really saw the benefits of getting the interaction with your team members. There are certain things that are going to take place in an active learning situation when you are trying to make decisions that are just not going to come across even when the instructor is teaching. There are certain points that you can learn from each other.

Do you have any fears or doubts about what the simulation will accomplish?

My main fear is that I might have one or two teams that check out mentally with the simulation and not put forth the effort as far as making decisions carefully because you really get the benefit by working through the considerations and variables. I wonder "Are they going to miss the benefit by not considering their decisions carefully round by round?"

What challenges do you feel you face at the beginning of this simulation process?

I tried to make myself familiar enough and that is one of the things the Train-the-Trainer did, it helped me get a bit more comfortable coaching the team. I can now talk from some practical experience of going through the simulation and I know it's going to come across as a lot more authentic as I can convey the pain and suffering and the angst which occurs when going through the simulation.

Have you considered customizing your course at all and do you feel you are aware of the choices that are available to you?

I really followed the suggestions that were provided—adding an extra service a some point, holding off on service design— so I can use that as a base line for this first course to let me get a feel for how these simulations run, and then I will have more confidence as far as modifying these things. I wanted the conjoint analysis research study in this Services Marketing simulation because that was a method that I am pretty comfortable with as far as research is concerned. So, I did add that as one of my instructor switches to present that to the students as an option. There are some things like demand seasonality and experience curves that look attractive. Those are some things that I will try when I have a longer—maybe a nine round— simulation where teams have a chance to adjust to the changes produced by those switches.

Do you feel that there is adequate support for a new user? Have you needed to contact Randy Chapman and have you found enough personal attention to your needs?

Randy is an amazing guy. His commitment to communicating throughout LINKS is one of the big benefits that I've seen of this simulation. The first time I called Randy, he was on vacation with his grandkids in Orlando. I heard kids splashing in the pool in the background and I thought to myself "why is he taking this call when he's on vacation?" Every time I have communicated with him he has responded, so I have been very impressed with that. I noticed that the LINKS system generates a lot of email messages and that's something I am glad I saw in the Train-The-Trainer so I can warn my students. It keeps the information flowing.

Are you comfortable with the support information we have on the website, and do you find this information to be easily accessible?

There was a lot of material and information out there and pretty good links to pull it together from one page to another. I found that a bit more of background rationale would have been helpful for me as far as the type of information I received on the web.

Have you determined the size of your groups?

Itend toward smaller groups for the LINKS Services Marketing Simulation. I find with larger groups a member can get lost so three or four-member groups is fine. I should have four or five firms and should be able to evaluate this run well as far as the pros and cons and benefits of the simulation.

Do you feel there will be enough challenge for the students?

Ido. The interesting thing about the simulation is the challenge is there if you take it on. It definitely is a challenge. I am hoping that through some of the evaluation mechanisms, performance, the different projects that I have related to LINKS and that's going to be born out if the students do not take on the challenge. One of the principles of doing group assignments in class is to get the competitive fires going. I think LINKS does that pretty well because you can see at all times how you are standing in comparison with others. That helps in stoking those competitive fires.

Do you feel that the students will enjoy this process and learn from it?

I think they will enjoy this process once they gain experience and become familiar with the LINKS system. Initially, there may be more pain than pleasure when they go back again and again to the manual and make a couple of mistakes here and there with their inputs, but I think there is a place when you get a firm grasp and your mind is able to think strategically and get strategies you can employ. So after the first few rounds I think I will see the students getting a lot more enjoyment than at the initial set up.

Do you feel that the time pressure involved in the group's decision making is critical?

I think that time pressure is a good thing. You are going to have deadlines in the corporate world that are hard and fast and you are going to have hard and fast deadlines in LINKS. Managing those deadlines is a good exercise.

Anything else to add?

Things that other instructors have done, whether it was syllabi, class assignments, descriptions as far as end-game, was really helpful and provided lots of support as a first time user who was putting a class together.