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Teaching With LINKS: You Can Teach An Old Dog New Tricks



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What course did you teach with LINKS?

I used LINKS in Principles of Marketing, an undergraduate course for Honors students. I have about 12 years of experience teaching, but the course itself was a new prep for me – a situation that turned out to be ideal for learning and incorporating a simulation into my teaching. You will need to devote some time as an instructor to learning LINKS but you are basically killing two birds with one stone when it's part of a new prep. To that end, the LINKS Train-The-Trainer course was very useful: I did it with a couple of my more advanced doctoral students (who wanted to learn the simulation for their own eventual teaching), and we even managed to have fun and make a little money!

How did LINKS fit into the course?

I ran LINKS in the middle portion of the course. The course first covered the topics of Segmentation, Targeting & Positioning, Product, and Marketing Research. These topics segued well into the simulation, and afterwards I returned to the topics of Pricing, Channels, Promotions, and other topics. I thought this structure worked reasonably well: LINKS brought to life earlier topics in the course, and students could recall examples of their LINKS experience to bring later topics to life.

It might be worth moving up Pricing: students struggled a lot with price in the simulation and might have benefited from earlier coverage of the topic. On the other hand, they were very engaged in our discussion of price afterwards!

What were the students like?

The honors course consists of about 30 high-caliber students – a class size that is a tad large for a one-industry simulation but worked reasonably well. The students are smart, hard-working, and self-motivated students, who are also quite competitive – again, ideal for a simulation. There is really no downside with this kind of a class, except that struggling firms took things pretty hard! It was also interesting to me that students obsessed over small random variation in the starting point of the firms in the initial round, and several students were quite convinced that they had discovered serious flaws in LINKS (or the manual) – none of which panned out with investigation but were certainly a sign of competitive intensity. Most of the students in the class were not marketing majors but their feedback indicated that the hands-on marketing experience provided by the simulation was considered invaluable.

How did you implement LINKS?

The simulation covered about 4 weeks of classes, with 2 decision rounds each week. This approach is relatively compact, which brings with it a certain excitement and intensity (plus avoids any feeling of 'drag' near the end of the simulation). The major downside is that outside events can really interfere with team decision-making, and some students noted this issue in their feedback on the simulation. There is no easy solution here, I fear. It is simply not possible to work around all of the extracurricular activities of university life (e.g., Homecoming, Thanksgiving, THON fundraising ... and that's not counting football).

During LINKS, I typically met with the students for a short tutorial at the start of each class and then the students broke off for team meetings and I circulated to coach. I believe the group tutorials were important: there was a fair amount of heterogeneity even in this honors class (e.g., knowledge of break-even analysis), and I also thought the students benefited from more formal tutorials on the interpretation and use of marketing research studies (after a round or two of discovery and coaching). Because I am a big advocate of using marketing research to inform managerial decision-making, that approach also fit in well with my general philosophy for the course.

How did you evaluate students?

My evaluation of LINKS consisted of three components: their actual performance in the simulation, the team's class presentation at the end of the simulation, and the individual memo-to-my-successor. (I also took into account my observations during coaching, as well as their Presidential Review Meetings, as part of their participation grade, and I conducted peer evaluations and incorporated this input as well.) All of the components worked reasonably well but it will be necessary to provide more specific guidance next year. Some students 'got it' but others had trouble with the relatively open-ended nature of these assignments (perhaps unsurprising in hindsight as the students were sophomores taking their first business class at university). I also plan to auction off a couple of the best memos next year in the first round (eventually making them available to all teams), which might help provide a model for how to approach these assignments.

Any final thoughts?

LINKS is a great way to incorporate hands-on marketing in the classroom, and I am seeing the benefits of LINKS even after the simulation is done. For example, I gave out 'LINKS souvenir gift cash cow key rings' (basically a cow-shaped key ring) to students in a later class as part of an in-class exercise illustrating pricing concepts (e.g., WTP/WTA and the endowment effect). The exercise worked just as I'd hoped – and the cash cows were very popular!





LINKS Global SCM 2012 Fall Competition Results

49 teams with a total of 186 participants competed in the LINKS Global SCM Competition in October-November 2012 with the LINKS Supply Chain Management Simulation. The 49 teams were grouped into seven LINKS industries in this competition.

Co-winners ('Gold Medalists') of this LINKS Global SCM Competition are (listed in numerical firm-number order, not ranking order, so these firms should be viewed as equal and unranked 'co-winners' in their respective LINKS Global SCM Competition industries):



- Industry SC1: firms 3 and 7
- Industry SC2: firms 2 and 7
- Industry SC3: firms 4, 6, and 7
- Industry SC4: firms 1 and 5
- Industry SC5: firms 2 and 3
- Industry SC6: firms 3 and 8
- Industry SC7: firms 1 and 3

These co-winning firms are from Bowling Green State University (multiple winners), Florida Atlantic University, Purdue University, Towson University, the University of Houston (multiple winners), and the University of Michigan (multiple winners).

Industry SC3 included ties, thus the three listed co-winners.

Performance evaluation was based on the multi-factor balanced scorecard performance evaluation system described in the LINKS Supply Chain Management Simulation participant's manual.



Forecaster Simulation

The Forecaster Simulation is an engaging, interactive 1-2 hour outside-of-class learning-by-doing tutorial that complements LINKS simulation usage.

- The 5 forecasting problems in the Forecaster Simulation are relevant to a wide range of introductory and elective business strategy, marketing, operations management, services, and supply chain management courses.
- The Forecaster Simulation includes within-simulation debriefing notes for each forecasting problem, accessible after completing each of the forecasting problems.
- Individuals or small teams can work on the Forecaster Simulation, with 2-person teams recommended for teaming's incremental learning.

Access the Forecaster Simulation via links on the main LINKS Simulations webpage and on each of the specific sub-webpages for LINKS simulations. A link also exists in the variant-specific sub-webpages in the Instructor Resources with a related link to the associated instructor notes for the Forecaster Simulation. The Forecaster Simulation direct URL is:

<http://www.LINKS-simulations.com/Forecaster/Introduction.php>

The Forecaster Simulation is a value-added offering of LINKS Simulations. There's no cost to using the Forecaster Simulation, but a passcode (e-mailed upon request) is required. A passcode may be requested within the Forecaster Simulation webpage.



Forecaster Simulation

LINKS simulations

Using the data provided within the 5 problems in the Forecaster Simulation, you're asked to assume the role of a forecaster creating a total of 14 sales volume forecasts. These forecasting problems span a range of industry settings and a variety situations and contexts.

Your goal is to develop accurate forecasts. Forecasting accuracy is measured by comparing your forecasts to the actual outcomes that are known to have occurred (revealed only after you commit to specific forecasts).

After completing the Forecaster Simulation, you should have an improved understanding of the challenges and issues associated with developing useful and accurate forecasts in a variety of business contexts.

Display Forecasts Overview Notes
Display Forecaster Details
Display Forecasting Approaches Briefing Notes

Display Problem #1 Details
Do Problem #1

Display Problem #2 Details
Do Problem #2

Display Problem #3 Details
Do Problem #3

Display Problem #4 Details
Do Problem #4

Display Problem #5 Details
Do Problem #5

Game Run Schedules With Embargos

In processing scheduled LINKS game runs, our normal administrative protocol is to “publicize” results immediately after the game run has been executed. “Publicize” includes uploading the new results to the LINKS web-server and sending e-mail to everyone in a LINKS industry (students and the instructor) to announce the availability of the new results.

For most LINKS instructors, immediate game run processing and turnaround after the input submission deadline is desirable. However, it is possible to “embargo” the availability of LINKS results until an instructor-specified time after the input submission deadline and subsequent game run execution.

Embargoing is useful for instructors who wish to release results only after a class has concluded (for example, to retain students’ undivided attention throughout the class) or for instructors wishing to have early access to the results, before their students can access the results. Embargoed results are always immediately available for access within the instructor’s firm-0 webpage in the LINKS Simulation Database.

To embargo results, encode your embargo schedule within the game run schedule that you submit before your LINKS event begins. Here’s an example entry on a game run schedule for an embargoed game run:

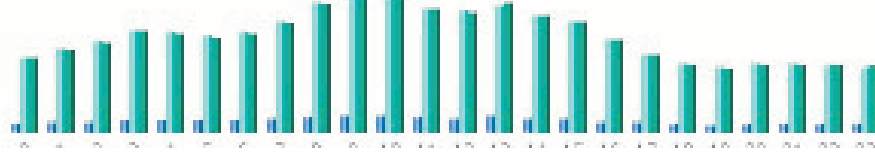


November 7 @ 100pm: Round #7; results embargoed until 830pm.

Everyone in a LINKS industry always receives an e-mail announcement of the availability of new results immediately after a game run has been executed, regardless of whether embargoed results exist. And, embargoed results are “immediately” uploaded to the LINKS website after a game run. However, students can’t access embargoed results until the specified embargo time limit has passed because the links to the Word Doc and Excel results files are unavailable until that time.



LINKS Stats: Webpage Hits



During 2012, our top-5 most-visited LINKS Simulations webpages have been:

- 1.Pro-Forma Projections
- 2.Decision Inputs Audit
- 3.LINKS FAQs
- 4.Global Top-10 Rankings
- 5.Retrieve LINKS Passcode

Why are these webpages so popular?

Pro-Forma Projections

This link is found on each firm's main page in the LINKS Simulation Database. These projections predict the firm's profitability for the next round given their current decisions in the LINKS Simulation Database. These projections are based on various assumptions, including the key assumption that current sales volume forecasts will be your actual sales volume realizations in the next round.

Decision Inputs Audit

This link is found on each firm's main page in the LINKS Simulation Database. This inputs audit checks the firm's current decision inputs for potential problems and inconsistencies. Possible issues are displayed in blue and errors are displayed in red. LINKS students find this page to be very useful in their decision making process.

LINKS FAQs

This link is available throughout the LINKS Simulation Database. When students make their decision changes for the next round, they can access the relevant FAQs through a link at the top of each web page in the LINKS Simulation Database. While it is accessed most often by students, this same link has been provided at the top of the instructor firm-0 webpage as well for the instructor's convenience.

Global Top-10 Rankings

The Global Top-10 Rankings are published weekly. The link can be found on the main page of the LINKS Simulations website. All teams that qualify for the Global Top-10 Rankings are notified via e-mail, along with their respective instructors. The top-performing firms in these two Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) are reported in the Global Top-10 Rankings:

- Change in Net Income to Revenue
- Forecasting Accuracy

Across all LINKS Simulations variants, these two KPIs are the easiest to compare cross-industry performance since higher values are always unambiguously better. These rankings have been available for just over a year now and in that time they have become very popular.

Retrieve LINKS Passcode

This link is at the top of the LINKS Simulations webpage. If a student or an instructor has misplaced their LINKS passcode, the passcode may be retrieve via this link. Input your three-letter industry code along with your official LINKS e-mail address to have an automated e-mail containing the passcode sent to that LINKS e-mail address immediately after the request is submitted.

International LINKS



How can LINKS have a greater “international” emphasis, for a course application where international issues are the primary focus?

☑ The LINKS products-variants (enterprise management, marketing, and supply chain management) are intrinsically international given their underlying market regions which may be defined as per an instructor’s wishes. For example, the initial three regions might be labeled Europe, Russia, and China (rather than the default labels of USA, Europe, and Pacific) with subsequent activated regions being labeled India and Brazil.

☑ Market sizes and market growth rates may vary across LINKS regions, as per an instructor’s wishes. High and low growth regional markets are possible, including changing regional growth rates during a LINKS event.

☑ Region-specific costs may vary, such as administrative overhead for actively-distributed products and opening/closing costs for regional distribution centers, reflecting the challenges of doing business in different parts of the globe.

☑ Varying demand seasonality across the market regions can further challenge LINKS firms, particularly in balancing demand and supply.

☑ Market region entry, exit, and “doing-business” barriers may be included in a LINKS event. Examples include:

- Entry and exit costs (for firms who initially enter a particular market region and for firms who exit a particular market region) might be implemented by the instructor, via Special Consulting Fee Adjustments on the instructor’s firm-0 webpage for a LINKS industry.
- Duties and tariffs for regions other than the “home-base” (region 1 in LINKS, which has no duties and tariffs for all LINKS firms that are always based in region 1) vary initially and can change throughout a LINKS event, to modify the relative attractiveness of international markets.
- A regional government might decree maximum price limits within its boundaries for set-top box products, requiring downward pricing adjustments for LINKS firms doing business in that market region.
- At about the mid-point of a LINKS event, the central government of an existing mature regional market (like China) might unexpectedly decree that only two set-top box firms can continue to do business within its boundaries. A subsequent auction among all LINKS firms for these two slots provides a lively and challenging business assessment opportunity for LINKS students.

For further conversation about LINKS internationalization and customization possibilities, please contact Randall G Chapman PhD, the LINKS author (Chapman@LINKS-simulations.com).

LINKS Global Services Competition 2013

The 2013 LINKS Global Services Competition is scheduled for March-April 2013.



Student teams participate in either of two separate services competitions ... either with the LINKS Services Marketing Simulation or with the LINKS Services Operations Management Simulation. These mid-sized simulations are appropriate for students in **introductory or elective courses** in marketing, services, or operations management courses.

Highlights of the LINKS Global Services Competition:

- Cross-Institution 6-Round Services Simulation Competitions
- Your Student Teams Compete Against Student Teams From Other Institutions· Challenges Students in an Intense Team-Based Cross-Institution Competition
- For Students in Academic Degree-Granting Programs Worldwide
- Undergraduates Compete Against Undergraduates; MBAs Compete Against MBAs
- Targeted at Upper-Level Undergraduates and All MBAs

Two separate LINKS Global Services Competitions are offered, with the LINKS Services Marketing Simulation and with the LINKS Services Operations Management Simulation. These are integrative, team-based, competitive simulations suitable for upper-level undergraduates and all MBAs.

Further details about the March-April 2013 LINKS Global Services Competition (scheduling, student eligibility, costs, and registration procedure) are accessible via the **LINKS Global Competition** link on the LINKS Simulations website:

<http://www.LINKS-simulations.com>

Participating in a LINKS Global Services Competition is an alternative instructional/learning opportunity to the traditional usage of LINKS within a single instructor's course (i.e., an event with students from a single course conducted according to the course instructor's preferred scheduling).

Questions? Faculty members with questions about the LINKS Global Services Competition are invited to contact Randall G Chapman PhD, the LINKS author (Chapman@LINKS-simulations.com).



LINKS Train-The-Trainer Seminars

January 7-11, 2013 and March 4-8, 2-13

LINKS Simulations Immersion Experience

Five Teleconferences and a Four-Round LINKS Simulation Event

Registration is available for the next five-day, intensive-mode Train-The-Trainer distance-learning seminars for the LINKS simulations. Randy Chapman, the LINKS author, leads these distance-learning events for academic faculty interested in learning more about teaching with LINKS. This intensive-mode seminar format includes 2-3 hours of work per day during the five days of the distance-learning seminar.

LINKS Train-The-Trainer Seminars are offered for the enterprise management, marketing, services, and supply chain management LINKS variants.

Current LINKS instructors are invited to pass along this announcement to faculty colleagues and

advanced doctoral students who might be interested in learning more about teaching with LINKS.

Experienced LINKS instructors sometimes participate in a LINKS Train-The-Trainer Seminar to refresh their memories of LINKS details just prior to teaching with LINKS or to explore another LINKS simulation variant for a future teaching activity. Such experienced LINKS instructors may elect just to participate in the TTT's four-round simulation event, ignoring the public teleconferences included in the LINKS TTT program. (PowerPoint decks are e-mailed to all LINKS TTT participants before each teleconference, so such experienced LINKS instructors may freely choose to participate in all, some, or none of the teleconferences as per their availability and interest.)

Details about this LINKS Train-The-Trainer seminar may be accessed via this URL:

<http://www.LINKS-simulations.com/TTT/TTT.pdf>

Reminders

LINKS Passcode Retrieval: LINKS passcode retrieval for a LINKS participant (student or instructor) is possible via the “Retrieve LINKS Passcode” link on the main LINKS webpage (<http://www.LINKS-simulations.com>). Executing the “Retrieve LINKS Passcode” operation e-mails the firm’s passcode to the participant’s official e-mail address as recorded in the LINKS Simulation Database.

Student Payment Timing: Student payment with a personal credit card is via the “Pay For LINKS” link on the LINKS webpage.

The published LINKS price (the discounted price) is in effect until the first round of LINKS is complete. Then, the price is increased 25%. This means that we can initialize a LINKS event (and advance LINKS through to its normal starting point) and students can continue to pay at the discounted price until the first scheduled round.

It is not necessary for your students to pay before LINKS begins to have access to the discounted LINKS price. Students must only pay before the first official game run on your game-run schedule to receive the discounted price. Thus, student payments can occur simultaneously with the beginning of a LINKS simulation event. As a practical matter, a final warning/reminder is e-mailed to those students who haven’t paid by the first game run, before implementing the non-discounted price.

E-Mail Address Management: Using their LINKS firm’s passcode, LINKS students may change their official LINKS e-mail address via the “E-Mail Address Management” button in the LINKS Simulation Database. Confirmations of e-mail address changes are e-mailed to the old and new e-mail addresses.

LINKS Instructor Resources: Instructors access LINKS Instructor Resources via the LINKS webpage. Contact Randy Chapman (Chapman@LINKS-simulations.com), the LINKS author, to obtain the username and passcode.



The LINKS Newsletter is a bi-monthly newsletter for current and prospective LINKS instructors and for LINKS friends. Please e-mail comments, suggestions, and other contributions (e.g., LINKS teaching tips) to Winkler@LINKS-simulations.com.



Editor: Cyndy Winkler

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