



## Discovering Marketing Principles With Mid-Course LINKS

I teach an introductory marketing class to approximately 25 sophomore undergraduates at Penn State University. This course introduces students to the basic principles of marketing, and I use LINKS for experiential learning. I have experimented with positioning LINKS earlier in the course rather than near the end, which seems to provide three main advantages. First, introducing LINKS mid-way through the course allows me to introduce the key marketing concepts of segmentation, targeting, and positioning and then let students loose to experience these concepts for themselves within the LINKS environment. This timing reinforces these important concepts immediately rather than waiting until later in the course. I feel it also helps students in LINKS – who sometimes can't see the forest for the trees – to keep their focus on strategic rather than merely tactical decision-making.



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Second, students gain experience with the marketing mix via LINKS earlier in the course. This experience with the challenges of pricing, product development and launch, promotions, and distribution allows students to discover some of these marketing principles for themselves. Afterwards, the students also have a shared experience in LINKS that supports subsequent discussion of these topics. The “aha” moment may occur during LINKS or during lecture and discussion afterwards related to the marketing mix -- an approach that may work particularly well with students who do not have a lot of work experience upon which to draw. It can be fun to find ways to leverage LINKS after the simulation is over. As an example, I have purchased relatively inexpensive “LINKS souvenir cash cow key rings” and had students buy and sell them during class to ‘bring alive’ concepts in pricing.

Third, positioning LINKS mid-way through the course also provides a few pragmatic advantages. It allows me to break up lecture and case discussion with a few weeks of hands-on marketing activity. (I prefer to provide several weeks of immersion in the simulation, with 2 decisions per week for 3 weeks, rather than spreading it out over the term.) It also helps avoid putting LINKS in the latter part of the course where it tends to compete for students' time with projects/deliverables in other classes, as well as Thanksgiving break (if teaching in the fall).

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So is there any downside to placing LINKS midway through the course? The main disadvantage is probably that some marketing concepts are particularly difficult for students to discover for themselves through experience. For example, students seem to struggle a lot with channel management issues during LINKS – but, on the plus side, our discussion of channel conflict afterwards is enriched by the simulation experience. Where appropriate, instructors can hold mini-tutorials during LINKS (e.g., on breakeven analysis) and LINKS then provides an immediate application of these concepts to reinforce student learning.

As may be imagined, not all students appreciate the opportunity to learn by doing (especially when it involves failure!) ... but the trade-off is the impact of “aha” moments of discovery on student learning.