



## Using LINKS in a Marketing Research Class

I have been using various versions of LINKS for a decade now. But until this semester, I had never used LINKS in a marketing research class. It was a different simulation experience than my usual marketing strategy or supply chain classes. A synopsis of my experience and recommendations follows.



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### Objectives

My goals for incorporating the LINKS Marketing Research Simulation into my marketing research class were twofold. First, I wanted to give my students a hands-on experience interpreting market research in a context where students were more involved in their analyses than they were in a typical homework assignment. Second, I was trying to create an experience where the students would internalize the lesson that utilizing market research is essential for making good decisions in a competitive market.

### Summary of Experience

Toward the end of the semester, students were required to read the LINKS manual and we also covered parts of it in class. Teams were developed through self-selection and then random assignment for those who did not self-select. Once the first set of decisions was due, each subsequent quarter ran exactly one week later. This allowed the teams plenty of time to review the results and market research from the previous quarter.

Each team was also required to meet with me each week to discuss their results and their goals for the following quarter. These team meetings also provided a good opportunity to ask each team about what their market research reports meant. This turned out to be a valuable activity as it helped identify unique misconceptions held by different students about how to interpret various market research reports. These meetings turned out to be an effective way of reaching students who struggled to learn through traditional classroom methods.

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At the end of the simulation, each team gave a presentation about their experience. As part of their presentation, they had to provide a competitive analysis on another firm. For example, Firm 1 reported on Firm 2, Firm 2 discussed Firm 3, and so forth with the last firm analyzing Firm 1. This allowed each firm to spend their time focusing on one competitor and also helped the class pay attention to each presentation as the material differed each time.

## Suggestions for Tweaking the LINKS Marketing Research Simulation

The other LINKS variants I have used all start in Quarter 4, after generating three quarters of history for the students. This variant is only four quarters long and starts with Quarter 5. I understand this change allows the students to operate the simulation for the second year of the firm, but after ten years of teaching with LINKS, my expectations of where students should be at a certain point in time were always off a quarter. As any engineer will affirm, better is not always better, standard is better. I recommend making the starting quarter constant among all the LINKS simulations.

More substantially, I also recommend adding to the number of market research reports available by default. For example, toward the end of the class, I had students asking me if there were reports they could buy to help them know which positioning messages would work best in each region. While these reports are available in the other variants I have used, they are not a default option in the LINKS Marketing Research Simulation.

## Class Use Suggestions

The LINKS Marketing Research Simulation is designed for four rounds of decisions. This worked out well in class scheduling as the simulation was not the focus of the class, but a supplement. However, with only four turns, each turn was of great importance to the overall results. In practice, the first of these four turns was of limited benefit to the students as the only major decision they made was to order market research. Next time, I will provide all firms with a carefully selected subset of the instructor research report when they start the simulation to maximize their opportunities to utilize market research to make decisions.

At the end of the simulation, I closed with a double-run as has been standard practice in my other simulations. In the marketing strategy and supply chain variants, this tactic has reduced some of the end-game shenanigans that bright competitive students will create to both help themselves and mess with their competition – especially as it relates to inventory management. Since students know the game is coming to an end, closing with a double-run prevents the typical team from doing an emergency production stop and selling off their entire inventory. However, the marketing research variant does not have any inventory. This change makes sense given the name and focus of the simulation, but the absence of inventory management dramatically changed student behavior for the last turn.

Under these circumstances, a double-run actually encouraged end-game manipulation – something that was recognized and acted upon by a team in each industry. Given that LINKS market demand is

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highly elastic, several teams realized they had a great opportunity to dramatically reduce prices and take market share without risk of starting a price war. This will be true of any last turn (unless you end the simulation a turn earlier than the students expect), but the double-run multiplied the benefits of this tactic without providing any compensating benefit. Thus, I recommend ending the game on a single run when playing the Marketing Research variant. Alternatively, professors could end the simulation a turn early, but I would personally rather deal with the potential consequences of one turn of price dropping instead of hearing students from multiple firms complain that their strategy would have resulted in a win if we had played out the simulation as scheduled.

## Conclusions

Overall, the addition of the LINKS Marketing Research Simulation to the marketing research class was a success. It greatly enhanced the students' understanding of basic tools such as value maps, price sensitivity analyses, and conjoint analyses. It helped me achieve my goals of both increasing student involvement in research analysis and helping students understand why their professors so strongly promote the use of market research as an essential element in their decision-making processes.

I will use a simulation again the next time I teach marketing research, although I am wavering between reusing the LINKS Marketing Research Simulation (with the changes I recommended) or moving to the LINKS Marketing Strategy Simulation.