# Brand Yourself on YouTube: The Design, Execution, and Reflection of a Three-Fold Experiential Exercise

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*To incorporate social media in the marketing curriculum, this article presents a three-fold experiential exercise in an upper division e-marketing class. Students were required to independently design, execute, and reflect upon a self-branding video project on YouTube. Survey results suggest that incorporating all three elements (strategic planning, execution, and reflection) in one single project, helped students to gain insight of the strategic and executional challenges in social media marketing, built students' confidence in learning new message production skills, and catalyzed students' interest in trying out social media tools to engage target audiences.*

## INTRODUCTION

With the rapid development in social media marketing, it has become an imperative for companies to capitalize on various online marketing opportunities, in order to connect and engage with their target consumers. According to a recent market report based on 27 national surveys, nearly two thirds of American adults (65%) are using social networking sites, up from 7% in 2005 when the consumers' usage of social media was first tracked (Pew Research Center, 2015). It is expected that companies that maintain an active and engaging social media presence will be generously rewarded in making deeper emotional connections with customers, and communicating their brand value more effectively (Delzio, 2014). Fully recognizing the advantage of maintaining company's social presence to sustain marketing success, both employers and marketing educators highly value college graduates' experiences and skills in designing and implementing social media marketing communication programs.

Among the top marketing skills that affect business students' career success, being able to successfully market one's professional brand was regarded as essential, not only in landing a good job in a highly competitive job market, but also turning a personal talent or entrepreneurial concept into a small business (Hansen, 2010 a; Hansen, 2010b; Myers, et al., 2011 ). Marketing scholars and practitioners have argued that self-marketing on social media platforms maximize "the return on one's investment of time, energy and effort" (Guthrie, 2010), as they provides marketers with unique opportunities to track and monitor real time engagement with target audiences (Eckman, 2010).

Marketing educators have long advocated incorporating self-marketing skills on social media in college business curriculum, to prepare students for career success (McCorkle, et al., 1992; Caravella, et al., 2009; Greer, 2010). Recently a growing number of innovative educators have experimented with marketing exercises on various social media platforms to engage the "digital native" college students (Prenskey, 2001), such as, Facebook and LinkedIn (McCorkle and McCorkle, 2012), Twitter (Rinaldo et

al., 2011), Blogs (Schlee and Harich, 2013), Second Life (Halvorson et al, 2011), and YouTube (Payne et al., 2011).

Nonetheless, many questions remain unanswered regarding how to best incorporate social media skills into the traditional strategic marketing planning framework in an up-to-date professional marketing curriculum. Two issues deserve particular attention: First, students' competency in the application and implementation of self-marketing strategies often takes a lower priority compared with the competency in strategic planning process itself. Despite endeavors on various social media platforms (for examples, McCorkle and McCorkle, 2012; Rinaldo et al., 2011; Schlee and Harich, 2013), few scholars have explored the vast experiential learning opportunities to effectively link strategic marketing planning and hands-on executions on appropriate social media platforms. For example, Myers et al. (2011) examined a seven-step strategic self-marketing exercise on social media. While emphasizing on the process of strategic marketing planning in a context of a self-brand, the execution and message production tasks were largely left for students. There seems to be an untapped pedagogical opportunity for developing students' competence in executing social media content in a systematically structured manner. As marketing scholars call for a professional-oriented marketing curriculum that emphasizes linking marketing theories and hands-on application, the upper division applied and skill-building courses could find innovative ways to reinforce this focus on "depth", rather than "breath" of the marketing principles through comprehensive term-long projects (Schibrowsky et al., 2002).

Second, critical and reflective thinking skills were often inadequately stressed in teaching self-marketing, perhaps due to the lack of instructional time and resources, given the usual large number of enrollment in undergraduate marketing classes. Ackerman et al. (2003) has found that marketing instructors often experience obstacles to incorporate critical and reflective thinking in their teaching even though they are fully aware of its importance. These obstacles can come from a variety of other sources as well, such as student sloth and time demands on both students and faculty. To prepare students better for the fast growing marketing landscape on social media, there is a growing need for more effective and efficient experiential projects that emphasize higher-level learning (Bloom et al., 1956), which is associated with critical thinking – application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of the critical decisions in marketing plans.

**A THREE-FOLD SELF-BRANDING PROJECT**

To address the need of developing students' execution skills and critical thinking skills in social media marketing, a three-fold "Self-Branding through YouTube" project was conducted in an upper division marketing class at a large Western public university. The project involves three phases throughout a 10-week instructional term.

**Self-Branding Strategic Planning**

Twenty-three upper division students in an e-marketing class were asked to apply strategic marketing planning principles to promote their career related "self-brand" in the form of a YouTube video. With Strauss and Frost's (2009) e-marketing planning process at the backdrop, students were equipped with the strategic planning process in a concisely developed seven-step format: 1. Situation analysis; 2. Brand differentiation; 3. Setting marketing objectives; 4. "E-marketing mix" strategies; 5. Implementation of the plan; 6. Budgeting; and 7. Evaluation plans. To promote a hands-on experience of self-branding using YouTube platform, students were asked to create a short self-promotion video (between 1-3 minutes) to include in their e-portfolio. Students first went through the design stage, which would be followed by execution and reflection stages later.

*Design the Self-Branding Strategy*

In order to identify one's own "brand identity", students were asked to conduct some "soul searching", i.e., first identify what is their "brand" to promote. Questions such as "who am I", "what is my professional brand that I want to promote?", "what is the unique value in me that makes me stand

out", help guide students to sift through their career related interests, aspirations, skill sets, and experiences they have up to this point of their life. This exploratory step is critical for students to articulate a clear professional brand, as well as a "value proposition" they want to communicate to the audience. Next they were asked to clearly identify their target audience of this video. Questions such as "Whom this video is made for?", "Why I need to reach them to promote my professional brand?", directed students' attention to the characteristics and needs of the target audience. Beside YouTube, students also considered other placement channels, to maximize the exposure to their chosen targeted audience.

*Design the Video Strategy*

In this step, students were asked to focus on the video itself, as a key messaging vehicle to communicate their self-brand to target audiences. First, they were asked to set marketing objectives they intend to achieve through the video. Specific guiding questions were provided, such as "what do I want to accomplish in this video?", "what kind of exposure I would like this video to get?", and "what specific measurable effects (i.e. concrete attitudinal or behavioral metrics) I want to achieve among the targeted audience of this video?". These questions guide students to follow a "SMART" (specific, measureable, attainable, and time-specific) approach at the design stage, and throughout the project, holding the video performance accountable.

**Video Production and Execution**

Unlike many strategic branding exercises that stop at the design stage, students in this project were asked to not only plan, but implement various execution details, to make their self-branding plans come to life YouTube. On the message production level, they were asked to carefully plan the visual and textual details of the video, such as who would appear in the video, what will be said and played in the video, how to make it all happen, what techniques, equipment, time and resources will be needed for the tasks. After these were completed, students moved to the video production stage. Most students used digital cameras, camcorders, or mobile phones, to shoot the video, and managed the video editing process through self-tutorials online. The university Multi-Media Studio also lent help for students needing equipment, software, or learning resources and tips, in shooting and editing videos. At last, students were asked to upload their videos on YouTube, and made the links accessible to the whole class.

**Critical Reflection Paper**

After uploading the finished video on YouTube, students were required to write a short reflection paper (2-3 pages), reflecting upon the process of design and execution of the video message, and critically evaluating the effectiveness of the video in achieving the strategic objectives. Firstly, students were asked to clearly and concisely describe the "personal brand" they intended to establish through the video, and articulate a memorable "value proposition" that defines their "personal brand". Students were particularly instructed to justify their "value proposition" in order to encourage a deeper level critical thinking of the various branding decisions based on the self defined "personal brand". Secondly, they reflected upon the "marketing objectives" that were established in an earlier stage. Not only had they spelled out the "marketing objectives" for the video prior to production, students also had to defend the "appropriateness" of these objectives in promoting their self-identified "personal brand". Thirdly, students reflected upon their choices of the targeted audience. They had to justify through audience research why a particular target group was chosen, and why it was considered appropriate to connect and engage them in light with pre-established marketing objectives. Lastly, students reflected on their "execution strategies", now that they had implemented the design ideas and produced the video. They were asked to link the "execution strategies" used in the video with the "objectives" they set forth earlier in the term, and discuss why they think these strategies would be successful (or not successful). They also proposed additional measures to monitor the performance of the video in real time on YouTube, and other placement channels if they proposed any.

**SURVEY OF STUDENTS LEARNING EXPERIENCE**

To gauge students' learning experiences throughout the self-branding exercise, an online survey was conducted through Survey Monkey™ at the end of the term. Eight open-ended and Likert-type questions were used in the short survey (See Table 1). All 23 students responded to the survey as an exit assignment at the end of the term.

**TABLE 1**
**SURVEY QUESTIONS**

| Items | Questions |
|---|---|
| 1 | *How many hours in total did you spend in this video and video strategy paper project?* |
| 2 | *This project is helpful for me to gain insight in promoting myself through videos.* |
| 3 | *The project helps me gain confidence in promoting myself using videos.* |
| 4 | *The project helps me understand the strategic planning process of using videos in e-marketing programs.* |
| 5 | *The project helps me gain a deeper understanding of the execution challenges involved in producing effective e-marketing videos to achieve marketing objectives.* |
| 6 | *The project helps me develop a greater interest in using videos in e-marketing programs.* |
| 7 | *If you were the instructor, how would you do differently in the design of this "self-branding" video and video strategy paper project?* |
| 8 | *What would you like to suggest the instructor to improve students' learning experience in this project in the future?* |

*Question 1:* On average, students reported to have spent 14.39 hours throughout the term on this project, including designing, executing, reflecting, and writing. Given this exercise was conducted in a 10-week instructional period, it averages about 1.5 hours work for every instructional week, which is reasonable for a comprehensive class project. Even though the work might not be equally distributed over the term, the total amount of work spent on the project can be an obstacle in a fast paced academic term on a quarter basis. As Ackerman et al. (2003) observed, the time demand can be perceived as an obstacle for less motivated students and resource deprived instructors.

*Question 2:* 82.6% students responded that this project helped them gain insight in promoting themselves through videos. Students seem to have gained more "depth" of the self-marketing process in this experiential project, compared with a typical "breath-driven" general strategic planning exercise. As Schibrowsky et al. (2002) pointed out the "breath-driven" approach might be inadequate in professional oriented business programs in preparing students for the insight needed to apply what they learned in marketing. Depth-driven approach, even though challenging in its demands of resources, could potentially maximize students' deep level learning in upper division classes.

*Question 3:* 78.2% students responded that this project helped them gain confidence in self-promotion. Increased confidence indicates enhanced self-efficacy in career-relevant learning across age groups (Maurer, 2001). This project experience seems to have instilled confidence in students in marketing themselves in a competitive social media environment, particularly using YouTube videos.

*Question 4:* 100% students responded that this project helped them understand the strategic planning process of using videos in e-marketing programs. This reinforced the idea that teaching students self-marketing skills could be an effective way to apply strategic marketing principles in a career-planning context (Myers et al., 2011).

*Question 5:* Regarding video execution challenges, students' responses varied across individuals. While 90.3% of students (56.5% agree, 33.8% strongly agree) responded that they gained a deeper understanding of the execution challenges to produce an effective e-marketing video, the rest of the students disagreed that the project helped them in enhancing their skills in producing e-marketing videos. This demonstrates that in terms of execution of e-marketing strategies using a particular platform, such as YouTube, some students may possess higher competency than their peers. Perhaps such competency was developed through the student's personal interests and personal online engagement experiences (such as

social networking and gaming videos). However, most of the upper division marketing students in this project seemed to appreciate the particular challenges better through their required experience in designing a YouTube video for a specific set of marketing objectives (See Figure 1).
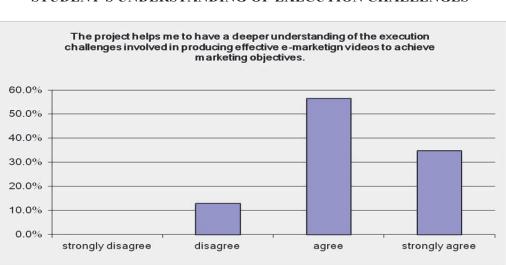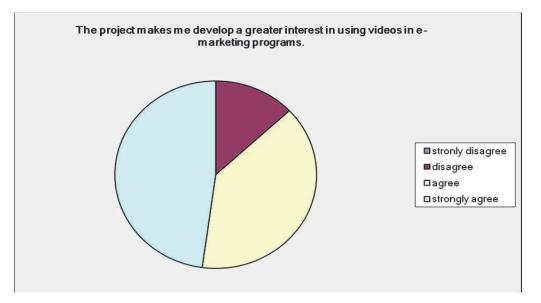
**FIGURE 1**
**STUDENT'S UNDERSTANDING OF EXECUTION CHALLENGES**



*Question 6:* 87% students responded that the project helped them develop a greater interest in using videos in e-marketing programs (See Figure 2). Interest is an affect-oriented response that can lead to future actions, be it acquiring more video production skills, or spinning off to designing integrated marketing communication campaigns that involve a significant amount of social media content. This experiential exercise seems to be effective in cultivating students' interest in tinkering with online videos, and utilizing multi-media tools in marketing.

**FIGURE 2**
**STUDENT'S INTERESTS IN USING E-MARKETING VIDEOS**

*Question 7 & 8:* After participating in this experiential exercise, students supplied comments on their learning experiences. They also left suggestions for improving the project in the future. Some comments that are particularly insightful in understanding students' learning experiences, emerge around the following themes.

*The Challenge of Planning for a "Self-Brand"*

Some students mentioned that "self-branding" was a little bit outside their comfort zone, as typical marketing class projects usually involve a product or a service a company offers. Students seem to have a hard time to identify their own "self-value" when looking at their own emerging professional identity as a brand. As one student wrote, "I think the hardest struggle I have is not knowing what exactly defines me. I think it is pretty hard to self-brand yourself when you are barely still trying to know yourself". Another student reported that "the term 'self-branding' did not seem to resonate with some people". As upper-level marketing students, the sentiment reflected here indicates a greater need to make marketing curriculum and instructional activities more relevant to students, in preparing them to develop a clear sense of professional self awareness, meaning, recognizing their unique professional strengths, weaknesses, as well as goals, and aspirations against their competition.

*The Challenge of an Individual-Based Format*

Even though the project is clearly structured in step-by-step instructions with thought-provoking questions, to guide the design and production of a marketing video, the substance of a "self-brand" is left open for individual students to define and express. There seems to be both "love" and "hate" sentiments among students on the "openness" of this project regarding what and how to articulate individuals' personal "brand values". One student wrote: "I think the way the project was executed was great. It allows students to be creative in their own way as there is no exact format for your self-brand". This represents those who love the challenge of self-exploration of both the value of the self-brand, and the best way to express it through a video to a chosen target group. Another student wrote, "I was first confused about what you (the instructor) were looking for. Once I realized how open we were to be creative, I felt more confident in what I was doing." On another token, longings for a more specified format, more detailed instructions, and more comforting examples from peers that explore similar topics of self-branding, were also expressed by students. When facing the challenges of executing the strategic self-branding ideas, some wished the project can be done by at least two people, or through a more commonly used group project format, to save time and efforts. It also shows that some adjustment on the students' side could have been made conscientiously to meet the challenges in a short academic term. As one student wrote, "I now love doing it. At the beginning I was afraid I didn't do well, but it turned out good, and I am now more confident and know how to make a marketing video on YouTube".

*The Challenge of Video Production and Execution*

As expected the video production and execution aspect seems to challenge many students, while leaving a small number of students positively reinforced with their self-acquired competency in social media content creation. Some reported that making a video about oneself is "intimidating". They particularly reported that if they are only required to "make a straightforward video without considering effects, they might do better." This seems to suggest a lack of adequate integration of different components of strategic marketing processes, taught in marketing curriculum. In this case, objective setting, strategy design and implementation, and performance evaluation, integrated in one class project, deepen students' understanding of the entirety of marketing planning and execution process. Students seem to have learned a much valued lesson, that marketing professionals need to hold their strategic planning and execution efforts accountable by measuring program performances against a set of pre-established marketing objectives.

**DISCUSSION**

The three-fold project involves strategic planning, message production and execution, and reflection and critique in an engaging context of self-branding, and on a popular social media platform – YouTube. The "depth" of marketing principles is carried out through students engaging in hands-on designing and executing their own self-promotion plans. The reflective paper at the end provides students an opportunity to critically examine the entire learning process, and to evaluate the results against the pre-established marketing objectives. Overall, it is apparent that students enjoyed the project more once they started tackling the challenges head on, and solving problems along the steps. Students seem to experience particular challenges that come from clearly identifying, and articulating what is their "self-brand". This process seems to make them gain more insight of the self-marketing process (particularly SWOT analysis and target market selection), and better ready themselves in a competitive job market that they will face in the future.

Students' confidence seems to emerge after they overcome a few obstacles and venture out of their comfort zone. A clear "self-brand" also emerged when they started to objectively and strategically assess their own "self-value" and the marketing "objectives" they wished to achieve. Many students expressed a strong interest to observe more self-branding videos by peers, especially those effective in achieving the "marketing objectives". Many expressed a heightened interest in using videos in future marketing endeavors, which comes with an enhanced sense of confidence in the execution and implementation of a video message over YouTube.

This experiential exercise was conducted in an upper division e-marketing class, where applying marketing principles in e-marketing platforms is emphasized in the curriculum. It may also be used in upper division marketing communication, advertising, and branding classes, in professional-oriented business schools. Its hands-on emphasis and incorporation of critical reflective thinking may contribute to a more in-depth understanding of marketing principles in an ever-changing social media landscape. Future efforts are encouraged to apply the exercise in more integrative marketing contexts that further strengthen students' competency and preparation for career oriented endeavors.

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