

# THE CREATIVELY LITERATE MARKETER: DESIGN EDUCATION EMBEDDED IN CANADIAN UNDERGRADUATE MARKETING

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## ABSTRACT

Design is the emotional bedrock of influence and persuasion in contemporary marketing practice. Design plays a significant role in connecting audiences to brands, creating value, contributing to business performance, and enhancing new product development. As traditional marketing practices evolve, the education of early-career marketing professionals must include creative literacy, creatively-relevant processes, and a creative mindset.

Faculty delivering the Bachelor of Business Administration – Marketing, in the Bissett School of Business at Mount Royal University have recently completed a radical redesign of curriculum, incorporating three design-focused courses and a number of design threads bridging the curriculum -- a first for a Canadian undergraduate institution.

The curriculum redesign also allowed Mount Royal Marketing faculty to frame a progressive view of the marketing role, which focuses on deeply rationalized brand identity development, the design of authentic meaning systems, relationship marketing practices, empathy, emotional engagement, and longevity between organizations and their key audiences.

**Keywords: Creative Literacy, Marketing, Curriculum Re-design**

## 1. SITUATION

### 1.1 CRITICISM OF MARKETING CURRICULA & CHANGES TO THE MARKETING ROLE

Over 15 years ago, criticisms of marketing education and marketing curricula in undergraduate education began to emerge. A variety of scholars recognized then that a narrow emphasis on marketing as managerial or strategic science alone was insufficient in preparing students for a profession undergoing radical change (Lamont & Friedman, 1997; Grönroos 1994; van Weyershoot and Van den Bulte, 1992; Webster, 1992).

By the mid-nineties, global marketing operations were transforming from hierarchical and functional departments to interdisciplinary client-focused teams; marketers were adapting to a proliferation of new digital technologies and social media; new knowledge regarding brand meaning

and its effects on consumer behaviour was increasingly integrated into the marketing process; and the impact of creativity and design on consumption in a diverse global marketplace was being felt.

## 1.2 Managerial Science Challenged from the Professions

While individual faculty members may have been fully informed about changes to professional practice, few universities and programs had the will, opportunity, or resources to refocus their undergraduate offerings from the managerial approach to marketing, adopted in the US circa 1960s.

An emphasis on microeconomics and profit maximization was at the heart of this managerial approach (Webster, 1992; Anderson 1982). This perspective fit well with the emerging management and behavioural sciences of the day and served the business strategy, structures and cultures of large, divisional, hierarchical organizations. Given the need, however, to respond quickly and flexibly to accelerating changes in technology, competition, and customer preference, the organizational form of marketing divisions and professional agencies was flattened to be nimble, cross-functional, and multidisciplinary (Webster, 1992).

## 1.3 New Value From the Art & Science of Branding

Concurrently, brands and the potential of brand management -- now seen as one of the most important forms of marketing communication in the mainstream west and across the globe -- were early stage in the adoption life cycle and widespread use was emerging in marketing and business practice.

For example, in 1998, Boeing appointed its first brand manager. By 2000, the giant aircraft maker had reached number 63 on the Interbrand list of financial brand values, priced at \$4 billion (Franzen & Moriarty, 2009). Now, the art and science of branding was providing a platform that allowed even large corporations like Boeing to engage with stakeholder groups, to compare themselves in the marketplace to both direct competitors and other non-related peers (e.g., General Electric, Microsoft, IBM, etc.), and to engage consumers with rich and creative meaning systems.

Creative meaning systems convey the personality and intention of a brand using artefacts (i.e., any marketing communication opportunity for a consumer interaction with the brand), experiences, and relationships (Roscam Abbing, 2009). Meaning systems incorporate metaphor and narrative, incorporate applied consumer psychology methods and brand identity visual systems (Shedroff et al., 2008).

## 1.4 Challenging Managerial Science from the Frontiers of the Brandscape

At the heart of brands beats dynamic systems theory which assumes that phenomena in our world exist in relationships and as part of a bigger picture. The main role of a brand is to create meaning around a shared social object and to help individuals form a relationship between matter and an intentional message (Danesi, 2006).

Interestingly, the emphasis on context and meaning that branding compels was a part of a professional worldview held by marketing 'functionalists' in the 1960s (Webster, 1992). This outlook stressed the value of understanding marketing institutions and functions in relationship to broader economic and social perspectives. Little of this worldview, however, was adopted or embedded in a curriculum dominated by a managerial approach to marketing which tended to isolate key variables and link them to predictable analytics such as cost-revenue projections.

In contrast, modern brand science embraces circularity and dialogue with consumers, allowing the brand to act in relationship to other brands, and to live in the context of our lives. The historical functionalist worldview of marketing makes sense in this context of brand science.

In addition, the art of branding, key in building rich meaning systems, includes an aesthetic and creative aspect that orders this complexity in ways that inspire hearts, minds, affinity, and ultimately consumption (Franzen & Moriarty, 2009; Wattanasuwan, 2005; Kleine and Kernan, 1991).

The aesthetics of brand strategy provide beautiful, harmonious and considered solutions to functional marketing problems. One need only think of Steve Jobs and the host of product developers, designers, engineers, marketers and retailers behind the Apple ethos to see a near-perfect example of the science and art of branding and its powerful role for marketing communications excellence -- in building stakeholder value, in complementing and balancing a managerial approach to marketing, and in acting as a meaningful reflection of our society.

At Apple, marketing is not the sole responsibility of specialists. Rather, across the organization, all parties understand and contribute to developing and delivering value to customers. Marketing is the product and the products are marketing. Brand science, creativity, and design 'know-how' are critical assets and the platform from which the brand promise, customer relationships and value are formed.

What then are the implications for marketing curriculum impoverished by a lack of exposure to subject matter, experience with creativity literacy, a problem-solution mindset, and creatively-relevant processes that the combined art and science of branding promotes?

## 2. PROBLEM

Unlike many of our academic peers at other universities, faculty in the Marketing program at Mount Royal University were given the mandate in 2010 to redevelop the undergraduate degree and its curriculum. Topics of early dialogue included dealing with the aforementioned problems, changes within marketing practice, new conceptual knowledge emerging in marketing education, and the experience and value of brand science.

Our faculty team was given the opportunity to take a 'blue sky' approach to redesign curriculum with one of the few constraints being to ensure that the new degree articulated with program, institutional, and university needs (e.g., courses and the parchment itself had to be transferable within our educational ecosystem, resources for program development were limited, etc.).

Our team had the latitude to set a vision for a new marketing program which would distinguish our graduates and position our degree as the leading undergraduate marketing program in Canada.

Mount Royal University (MRU) is positioned as a university with a 100-year reputation for exceptional pedagogies and practices of high quality teaching and learning that prepare our graduates for their chosen profession. Not surprisingly, our team turned its attention to students first and a desire to develop the most creative and capable marketing graduates.

### 2.1 Emphasizing the Student Experience

Potential marketing students themselves are brand choosers in a product landscape that, for the most part, is undifferentiated in its emphasis on managerial marketing alone. Kleine (2002) argued that, "marketing programs [should] pay greater attention to enhancing the identification process that links students to marketing."

In her study of how students develop commitment to their major, Kleine's results suggest that a student's professional identity develops through the experiences and people associated with their

program. Over time, students become more accurate in describing the complexity of marketing and are able to contrast this insider's perspective with stereotypical images of marketers as strictly members of a sales force or as advertisers.

Further, Kleine (2002) underscores how essential it is that educators frame clearly what it means to be a marketing major and what, at a given institution, to cultivate and emphasize as the basis for students to then form clear mental schema and professional identities of their own.

Given our mandate, the MRU team had a clear opportunity to position an exceptional degree experience and to have students identify uniquely with our ethos. What would this ethos include?

## 2.2 Creativity & Design Literacy

In the spring of 2009, early questions and footwork on potential changes to the degree were underway. Pre-dating the official mandate for change, two marketing faculty members undertook a rigorous benchmarking review of undergraduate curricula in Canada, North America and at key international universities (n=41).

This benchmarking exercise confirmed that, by and large, programs still privileged and emphasized marketing strategy almost exclusively.

The benchmarking review was also extended to other offerings in our institution to determine and ensure that the scope of the new program would not overlap with the topics and interests in other academic areas (See Figure 1). The team was deeply committed to the design of a program that operated in respect of the subject matter expertise in other areas, one that was design to complement diverse offerings in different program areas. The new marketing curriculum as it was designed held to this integrity of purpose.

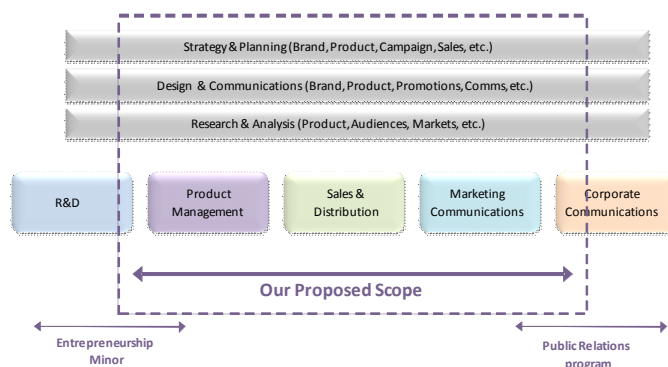


Figure 1. Proposed Broad Scope of the New Curriculum

Finally, the critical analysis of subject areas was extended to the current course complement, very much a product of 1960s managerial sciences. One of the most difficult and onerous tasks was unbundling the 'ways of knowing' and subject authority that informed our respective worldviews as individual faculty, including an over-reliance on stilted academic texts and instructional materials.

For example, marketing research, a topic that I myself had championed, was put under the microscope. I recall wondering, "How can we tinker with social science research methods? Will my course be less rigorous? Will I still be the subject matter expert in a newly-conceived course that introduces the science of marketing analytics as a key source of decision-making? Will I even have a course to teach?" Despite these tensions, our team continued their commitment to educational innovation without compromise as classes, topics, classroom exercises and outcomes were stripped down to their component parts.

Of note, were the early indications that the essentials of brand art and science were not commonly addressed or provided in marketing education across the ecosystems we examined. Creative literacy, creatively-relevant processes and characteristics of the creative 'mindset' are simply not integrated into studies; a massive gap and opportunity to meet a number of our goals.

### 3. THE OPPORTUNITY

#### 3.1 SETTING THE VISION

To achieve excellence, our Marketing program team determined that we can best help our students through a program structure that includes both strategic and creative capacities. By emphasizing this balanced approach, we feel the program will effectively meet the emerging needs of a dynamic industry and the marketplace they are entering.

Strategic capacities include the so-called 'left brain' of marketing, those processes and habits of mind that encompass the science of marketing (e.g., marketing research and analytics, placement, pricing etc.) and the so-called 'right brain' of marketing (e.g., the development of brand identity systems, visualizations, creative narrative, etc.).

In order to ensure progress on this ambitious but worthwhile mandate, the team set four key goals:

First, as noted, we understood the marketing curriculum needed to play both complementary and unique roles in the context of other departments' offerings on our campus. We did not want to conflict or overlap with other areas, nor did we want knowledge gaps for our students.

Second, through the redesign, we wanted to ensure that the new Marketing curriculum helped students attain the marketing attitudes and aptitudes required in their progressive studies and the marketplace.

Our intention was to honour foundational or classic marketing concepts, meet the needs of industry and contemporary practice, and lead as a marketing education innovator by creating dynamic and engaging educational experiences for students.

Third, our intention was to ensure that the Bissett School of Business Marketing program established and then met or exceeded key performance indicators (e.g. student attraction and retention, graduate hiring, marketing industry engagement and feedback, etc.).

Finally, we wanted to be practical in our ultimate redesign recommendations, and to document and share what we'd done.

#### 3.2 MARKETING PARTNERSHIP COUNCIL

In addition to deep faculty engagement on the project, the new ethos and program framework was also informed by consultations with a team of nearly twenty professional marketers drawn from a variety of industries (e.g., agencies, telecom, technology, energy, non-profits, social media, etc.) with diverse functional expertise (e.g., public relations, marketing, retail marketing, sales promotion, etc.).

As faculty continued to exert extraordinary effort in reengineering the program towards the mandate of creating Canada's leading undergraduate program in Marketing, this Marketing Partnership Council was engaged to provide insights from the profession on the 'ideal marketer' and feedback on the faculty team's recommendations.

#### 3.3 THE THOUGHTFUL MAVERICK

In brief, all of the redesign stakeholders agreed that the ideal marketer understands people and processes, understands marketing principles, and understands marketplace context.

From this, the ideal graduate was described as a *Thoughtful Maverick*, that is, someone who is rigorously analytical, fearlessly creative and recognizes the influence of context on decision making (see Figure 2).

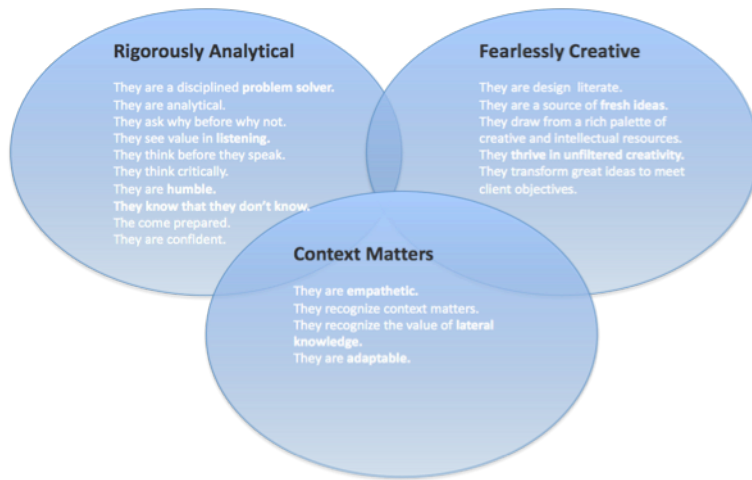


Figure 2: The Ideal Marketing Graduate from MRU - "The Thoughtful Maverick"

## 4. AN OUTCOMES APPROACH

The BBA – Marketing project then enlisted key instructional design staff from our Academic Development Centre who facilitated a process to define program learning outcomes; ultimately leading to eight new courses that would support the development of the *Thoughtful Maverick*.

Three streams of courses, initially conceived of as the 'Left Brain' stream (i.e., courses whose key learning outcomes link to analysis, facts, research and marketing management processes); the 'Right Brain' stream (i.e., courses whose outcomes link to creativity, imagination, design and communication) and a 'Lateral Knowledge' stream (i.e., those courses that link to foundational and contextual knowledge and allow students to connect the dots) were drawn. Old courses and program structures were scrutinized, some discarded and some transformed.

For the first time, outcomes related to creative literacy, creatively-relevant processes, a creative mindset, and design fundamentals were mapped, designed into curriculum, and will be delivered to marketing students in a Canadian undergraduate marketing program.

## 5. THE 'CREATIVITY' DELIVERABLES

### 5.1 CREATIVE PERFORMANCE IN MARKETING

While marketing science has mastered strategic, tactical and operational production, we are left with the question of what creative production would look like in a balanced contemporary marketing program. Amabile (1983) identifies the components of creative performance as domain-relevant skills; creatively-relevant skills; and task motivation (p.362).

Domain-relevant skills are considered the basic facts, technical skills and special talents for the domain in question (Amabile, 1998, p. 362).

Creatively-relevant processes describe a mindset and work style that ensures the search for solutions leads to novel solutions not obvious to others, the capacity to replace old strategies with

new directions, a comfort with complexity and ambiguity, and refusing to prematurely pass judgment on ideas (Amabile, 2010; Griffen and Morrison, 2010; Conti et al., 1996).

Finally, task motivation addresses those intrinsic qualities and attitudes activated when engaging with a task and the individual's perception of why they are engaging with the task. What is the purpose or reason for doing the work (Amabile, 2010)?

As a pillar of marketing education, Mount Royal University values creative performance and design insight as an essential, complementary and influential means create value for clients beyond marketing strategy. Simply put, creativity and design education has not migrated into a curriculum dominated by marketing science in North America.

Our curriculum enables graduates who are divergent thinkers; who are professionals that collaborate intelligently with art directors and design professionals; who are able to challenge and balance the routine or logical with rich brand meaning systems and design solutions; who adopt creatively-relevant processes that are contributive, and lead to new and interesting combinations of ideas for clients.

Our intention is that the University set a transdisciplinary direction for a generation of marketers who have the abilities to holistically create value for clients and the know-how to co-design strategic and creative assets in flattened, project-based profession.

## 5.2 CREATIVE LITERACY

As the new program design began to take shape, the threads of how to design creative production for the marketing context began to come into focus and we began to use the language of creative literacy, fluency, and mastery as we envisioned student progress through the new program (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. The New BBA-Marketing at MRU

Creative literacy –literacy referring to a basic language and toolkit for beginners -- includes a problem-solution mindset, often under the constraint of a limited set of intellectual experience capabilities and creative tools that enable solutions.

Design education normally provides a limited pedagogical experience for its learners (e.g., there is more than one possible solution to a problem, opportunities to rehearse creatively-relevant processes, and skill development/tools to literally sketch and discuss solutions). As counter-intuitive as it seems, these pedagogical processes are not widespread in marketing education.

For new students, creative literacy tends to rely on developing confidence by providing routines and developing safe performance habits where the output is a finished set of ideas, product or limited assignment. While students build their literacy, they are learning basic domain-relevant skills. As such, our first courses, *Marketing Design Literacy* and *Creating Brand Intelligence* were formulated.

*Marketing Design Literacy* introduces second-year students to the creative tools and processes essential to marketing. This course examines the fundamentals of design for brands and campaigns (i.e., colour theory, layout, the selection of fonts, etc.) across media platforms. Students discover methods to develop beautiful, well-informed creative solutions that meet an organization's needs and resonate with its audiences.

Meaningful marketing campaigns are developed through a transdisciplinary, rigorous, and creatively-driven process. Are we educating graphic designers in marketing? No, we are however educating marketing communication professionals who can interact with their design peers in a considered and well-focused creative collaboration because of their design literacy.

In the *Creating Brand Intelligence* course, students are immersed in public critique and deconstruction of the creative and emotional potential of existing marketing assets. Students reframe, redesign, rewrite and develop new elements for exceptional advertising and promotional campaigns.

While commonplace in design education, opportunities to decode design are rare for marketers. These habits of mind are valued in that they again bridge strategy to creative and enable the creatively 'literate' marketer to co-create with a peer community that is design 'fluent'.

### 5.3 Creative Fluency and Commitment to Mastery

Creative fluency and mastery suggest habits of mind where near graduates are able to interrogate an initial problem as presented, draw from a richer repertoire of creative and intellectual tools based on ever-expanding experimentation; the adoption and further mastery of processes that reinforce and individual's vision and professional identity; and comfort with unfiltered creativity where the output is the discovery of a rich, beautiful, thoughtful, creative, high-quality idea that can be transformed to meet client objectives.

As students progress through studies, they arrive at one of two capstone courses, one with an emphasis on strategy and the other *Professional Brand Studio* which best captures the ideas embodied in creative fluency.

In this design-driven capstone course, students create effective, meaningful and aesthetically-inspired projects in a marketing agency atmosphere. Marketing communications objectives are framed with a community-based client. Students produce a major portfolio-quality project, including a unique statement of practice, highlighting their creative abilities and professional intent as they enter the marketing profession.

By developing statements of professional intent production in the professional studio is designed to underscore that mastery is a never-ending goal subject to continued engagement and renewal beyond undergraduate education. Students are also encouraged to locate themselves in the creative ecosystem and to value collaboration with peers in a manner that respects those trained as creative 'masters' (i.e., those with explicit education and/or experience in graphic design, industrial design, art direction etc.).

The end goal of the Thoughtful Maverick is to be prepared to work with ease in the integrated brand creative environment, bringing their balanced knowledge of strategy and design to brand projects that are truly transformative.

## 6. WHAT'S NEXT

The final approvals of the new program are making their way through institutional systems with an intended start date of September 2012. In the intervening year, the faculty team has additional implementation tasks which include integrating course threads (i.e., that creative is present in strategy discussions and vice versa), ensuring that a variety of industries and marketplace contexts are provided to students, that assessment methods support the duality of the program, and that the new program is resourced for success.



While the opportunity for the radical redesign of a program is rare indeed, and at any given moment seems a monumental task, the unique opportunity to integrate topics of creativity and design, to nurture a new generation of marketers that are both strategically and creatively savvy, seems too wonderful an opportunity to pass up. It will be the students, in the end, who choose Mount Royal University based on their desire to be thought leaders and maverick thinkers in the brandscape. In turn, it will be the marketplace that vies for and demands this dynamic and leading class of extraordinary marketing creators.

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