

**Changing a Marketing Quantitative Unit's Perception of Quality:  
A Reflection on the Search for Short-Term Wins**

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**Abstract**

This paper critically reflects on a change intervention being run in an Australian university, for an undergraduate *quantitative marketing metrics* unit which has experienced low quality unit student evaluations, and uses Kotter's (2007; 2008) eight stage framework as a means for identifying missing key steps in the change intervention process. This paper uses this analysis to examine what makes a quantitative marketing subject change intervention successful and sustainable. It could be suggested that on the basis of the short-term wins identified the change intervention could be interpreted as successful. However when quantitative end of semester evaluations were published there was no statistical improvement in unit quality satisfaction. Practical implications are also discussed.

Keywords: curriculum, delivery, quality

## **Changing a Marketing Quantitative Unit's Perception of Quality: A Reflection on the Search for Short-Term Wins**

### **Introduction**

This paper reflects on a change intervention targeted at a second year undergraduate quantitative marketing metrics unit run in an Australian university which has been experiencing low student evaluations of unit quality. The performance indicator drawn from the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) that was used for the change evaluation is: "Overall I am satisfied with the quality of this unit". The paper outlines a change intervention executed within a marketing metrics unit in an Australian university. Kotter's (2007; 2008) eight stage change framework is used to identify that as a change intervention certain key steps were not present. The first difficulty was creating a sense of urgency which ultimately created a lack of emotional engagement at the departmental level. Another difficulty was the lack of a powerful coalition to drive the change, and the change was subsequently driven by the unit convenors with verbal but little material support from other academics. This resulted in no additional resources being allocated to the change at a departmental level. The final difficulty was that although the vision, which seemed academically sound, was not embedded in a situation of departmental urgency and thus lacked a strong coalition offering resources and support. This paper uses this analysis to examine what makes a quantitative marketing subject's change intervention successful and sustainable?

### **Literature Review**

It is well documented in the extant literature that there are many variables which bias student evaluations of quality, these variables include context variables like: demographic and psychographic variables, negative affectivity and organisational variables (see: Badri, Abdulla et al. 2006; Curran and Rosen 2006; Foley and Mitsis 2008; Mitsis and Foley 2004; Mitsis and Foley 2008). Curran and Rosen (2006) specifically identified that 77% of the variation in student attitude towards a unit is accounted for by four constructs: the instructor, the unit topic, subject execution and the teaching environment; and further noted that the unit topic needs to be acknowledged as a contributing factor to unit evaluations. Timing of evaluations is another bias variable reported within the literature, in other words when evaluations take place have an affect on course quality evaluations (Paswan and Young 2002).

Davies et al. (2006), found that mathematical or technical units have a tendency to score lower than their non-technical counterparts when class sizes were higher, and that class size has a negative effect on student evaluations of undergraduate quantitative units taught in the latter part of an undergraduate degree. Therefore there are a number of non-teacher related factors that can cause a low score in the quality indicator "Overall I am satisfied with the quality of this course." Quantitative marketing and business statistics units are subject to the same antecedents to those found in non-quantitative units.

Cook's (2008) study on the causes of Australian students' lack of success in a first year business statistics unit, revealed that several steps can be taken to improve student grades and outcomes which include: changing lecture notes to a more discovery style to enable students to make the links between the different methods used in the unit; the inclusion of regular homework; the introduction of online quizzes; and having peer assisted study sessions. Watson and Angus (2008), like Cook (2008), investigated the use of online multiple choice

tests as a form of assessment in a first year quantitative methods unit in an Australian higher education setting. Watson and Angus (2008, p. 153) found that there is significant support for using online tests to increase student understanding within a mathematical unit environment and that: *...students perform better with the aid of regular online testing, but they seem to also prefer the experience, an outcome that is rarely achieved when it comes to adding to the number of assessments a student must face!*

Using these diverse insights into what may determine overall unit quality perception, the academic staff members involved in delivering the compulsory second year undergraduate marketing metrics unit during semester 2, 2007 conducted a review in October of the marketing metrics unit as part of a planned change intervention to improve students' perceptions of unit quality. Kotter's (2007; 2008) eight stage leadership framework was chosen as a way of reflecting on the preparation and the design of this change process as it provides eight distinct steps people can follow to produce new ways of operating. Kotter's (2007; 2008) framework was chosen as it is a well known change management framework that is extensively used in executive education and so provides a useful and easily understood framework to analyse the findings of this study. Kotter and Cohen (2002) identified changing the behaviour of people as critical to a successful change intervention and this is accomplished by speaking to people's feelings. In highly successful change efforts, people find ways to help others see the problems or solutions in ways that influence emotion, not just thought. *Feelings then alter behaviour sufficiently to overcome all the many barriers to sensible large-scale change* (Kotter and Cohen 2002, p. x).

Kotter and Cohen (2002) outline that for the change to be successful, empowered individuals need to create short-term wins in order to emotionally reward those change agents, silence the critics and build momentum. Kotter (2008, p.10) adds that: *To avoid burnout, remember to stop and celebrate your progress.* The academic coalition running the unit set some clear goals to gauge success of the implementation of the unit changes. These included: gauging the classroom environment for students' tolerance levels towards the material being covered; receiving verbal feedback on the practicality of the course from students; and gauging student responses to the question "Overall I was satisfied with the quality of this unit" on the end of semester student evaluations.

### **The Quantitative Unit**

This compulsory second year undergraduate marketing metrics unit has been plagued by low student evaluations in particular with the item: "Overall I was satisfied with the quality of this unit", with no semester receiving a score of greater than 3.5 out of a possible 5 and some semesters receiving a lower score. In recent semesters over 2006 – 2007 the unit was plagued by students' attitudes that were consistent with the score of 2.7 out of 5 that unit received in its evaluation in semester 2, 2007. In investigating the perception of value the marketing metrics unit has been identified as an important unit by industry stakeholders and academics within the Department of Marketing alike but was not receiving the desired student evaluations. It was felt that this created two areas needing urgent attention. The first was the 'negative word of mouth' behaviour engaged in by students who had experienced the unit, which in turn sets a 'negative' mindset for students prior to enrolling in this core unit (Curran and Rosen 2006). Students who may have had a low attraction to learning the metrics/techniques introduced within the unit were told it was difficult and frustrating. The second was the consistently low unit evaluations on overall quality perceptions. These negative perceptions and ratings had implications for staff performance appraisals, and as a

result staff were reluctant to teach this unit. The departmental problem was this was a unit that was seen as important by industry stakeholders but had an ongoing problem of not generating student and staff engagement. The two academic staff members involved in the marketing metrics unit was the weak coalition which developed the long-term vision of the unit: A unit that is engaging to students through the introduction of new technologies and teaching methods, where students can easily see the connections between the unit's content and its marketing applications relevance to industry. Two over-riding objectives were then developed by the academic coalition:

1. Re-developing the unit's material into a more engaging and contextual setting; and
2. Re-developing the unit's assessment to reflect greater contextualisation and student engagement.

Table 1 below presents an overview of the unit's structure pre and post intervention development.

**Table 1: Unit Structure Pre and Post Intervention**

	Lecture Focus	Computer Laboratory Focus	Assessment
<b>Prior to Semester 1, 2008</b>	Focus on the analysis techniques needed to be understood and applied by students		Weekly mini-tasks (10%) 2 major assignments (10% + 20%) Final Exam (60%)
<b>Semester 1, 2008</b>	Fortnightly case study cycles: segmentation; pricing; market share; brand equity; and communication	Students replicate analytical techniques from the case study cycles by taking the role of the marketing analyst	Weekly online multiple choice tests (10%) 5 mini assignment 2 page management reports (5 x 6% = 30%) Final Exam (60%)

The change intervention began with a low sense of Departmental urgency and only a weak coalition in terms of access to resources to drive it.

### Searching for Short-Term Wins

Kotter and Cohen (2002) suggest that with some short-term wins created that the change effort will have direction and momentum, and that in successful situations this momentum is built upon to make the vision reality. The initial qualitative results yielded relatively positive short-term wins where repeat students mentioned that they have found the unit better structured than previously and that they can see the links and felt the concepts were easier to understand. Non-repeat students felt that compared to other research units they had done, they could see how the content would be used when they graduate. Therefore it could be suggested on the basis of the short-term wins the change intervention could be interpreted as successful. Kotter (2008, p.10) states that it is important not to let up and to: *Be relentless with instituting change after change until the vision becomes a reality*. This was also reflected in the final average grade which increased by 10% on the previous semester's results from 48 (N) to 58 (P). However when quantitative end of semester evaluations were published there was no

statistical improvement in unit quality satisfaction item (see Table 2). A possible explanation as to why student ratings did not increase may be the well documented business students' dislike of quantitatively-driven courses.

**Table 2: "Overall I was satisfied with the quality of this unit" Summary Statistics**

Year	Semester	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	No. of Enrolments	% of Student Participation
2007	2	2.66	1.06	154	61.04%
2008	1	2.58	1.16	107	70.09%

*Note: Derived from a 5 point Likert scale of 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree*

Kotter and Cohen (2002, p.152) noted that: *Deep into a transformation even if urgency remains high, even if people want to take on the big problems, and even if they succeed in generating waves of change, they can still fail because of exhaustion. They find they have to keep the organisation running, which means doing all the old work.* The reflection on this change process is building on the work of Kotter (2007; 2008), that when short-term wins are elusive, exhaustion with the attempt at change is easily found.

### **Practical Implications**

The practical implications from this course illustration are that change of a quantitative unit may be beyond the resources of an instructor alone. Empowerment means more than permission to do but also includes resources to do. As Kotter and Cohen (2002) note, for change to be successful empowered individuals need to create short-term wins to silence critics, build momentum and avoid burnout.

Instructors of quantitative marketing units are often faced with teaching environments, subject execution requirements and topics that have been determined by others. For course quality change to be successful insights from the change management literature can be usefully applied. These strengths can be applied to the preparation, planning and protection of the change intervention. When this is done, then it may be possible for an instructor to act as a change agent to successfully improve the perceived quality of a quantitative marketing subject.

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