

## Enhancing the Effectiveness of Student Oral Presentations

by

Charles L. Martin  
Wichita State University

### BACKGROUND

Given that communication processes lie at the very heart of all marketing endeavors, the importance of cultivating these skills in the classroom can not be denied.<sup>1</sup> Not surprisingly, a recent review of 60 syllabi from upper division marketing courses throughout the United States found that many marketing educators have adopted a philosophy of incorporating assignments into the curriculum to specifically nurture both written and oral communication skills. Often, however, marketing educators seem to assume that students already know how to effectively communicate, and that the experience gained through oral and written assignments will necessarily enhance these skills. But for many students the stacking of additional communication assignments leads only to a perpetuation of mediocre communication skills at best, and to an erosion of self-esteem and a distaste for communication processes at worst.

Therefore, this article introduces a comprehensive and systematic approach for enhancing the effectiveness of one communication arena, i.e., student oral classroom presentations. The *objectives* of the approach will first be identified, followed by a description of the *concept*, guidelines for *implementation*, and a brief *assessment* of effectiveness.

#### Objectives

The following objectives guided the process of developing and fine-tuning a desirable method for the staging of student oral presentations.

- **Skill Development:** Students should be more skilled in preparing and delivering an oral presentation upon completion of the assignment.
- **Content Competency:** Oral presentations should be accurate in their content. Students should demonstrate a comprehensive command of their presentation topics.
- **Audience Learning:** The education of class peers should be enhanced by the presentation process. Presentation topics should be meaningful and worthwhile.
- **Knowledge Enhancement:** Topics selected for presentations should enrich the presenter's understanding of the topic.
- **Understanding of Instructor's Expectations:** Students should have a clear and unambiguous understanding of the criteria and degree of rigor used in evaluating their presentations.
- **Effective Utilization of Class Time:** Valuable class time should not be wasted by staging mediocre or poor student presentations. However...
- **Equal Opportunity:** Every student should have the opportunity to give an oral presentation, and should be encouraged to do so.
- **Early Beginnings:** The assignment should discourage students from procrastinating.

### THE CONCEPT

The presentation approach ultimately developed, refined, and successfully implemented in an undergraduate marketing capstone course over a two year period may best be described as a multi-step assignment, as diagrammed in figure 1.

### Step #1: Topic Selection

Early in the semester each student is asked to randomly select a presentation topic from a list developed by the instructor. The list should include topics that are not excessively redundant with the instructor's planned lectures/discussions, yet are still relevant to the educational objectives of the course, and whose domain is defined precisely enough to facilitate meaningful coverage within the available class time. Examples of topics include: Marketing to the Government, Marketing to Seniors, Monitoring Customer Satisfaction, Leveraging Word-of-Mouth, and Marketing to Children, to name a few.

Students dissatisfied with their selected topic may take advantage of a two week period during which they may trade topics with other students or with the instructor. Enforcing a "trading season" deadline tends to encourage students to immediately familiarize themselves with one or more topics—thereby curbing some students' inclination to procrastinate. While exploring one or more topics, students are encouraged to interact with the instructor.

### Step #2: Outline Preparation and Approval

Next, students are asked to submit a tentative outline of their presentation, due during the fourth or fifth week of the semester. It is useful to have students *specifically* state in their outlines the principles or "big ideas" associated with the topic area. The insightfulness of the developed principles clues the instructor as to whether students have adequately reviewed and synthesized the breadth of the literature.

In addition, the principles serve as presentation springboards, of sorts, that logically lead to an elaboration of implications and practitioner recommendations. For example, an acceptable "retention marketing" *principle* might be: "It costs five to six times as much to attract a new customer as it does to retain an existing one." One *implication* would emphasize the wisdom of allocating some marketing efforts toward retention programs, with *practitioner recommendations* including discussion of specific strategies such as purchase reinforcement, affective engineering, incorporation of switching costs, etc.

Although outlines need not necessarily be graded, per se, they may be "approved" or "unapproved." Approved outlines allow students to sign-up for an out-of-class dress rehearsal session, while unapproved outlines require revisions and resubmissions. Given

that dress rehearsals are scheduled on a "first approved, first choice" basis, students who have a strong preference or aversion for a specific dress rehearsal session have a corresponding incentive to develop an appropriate outline early in the semester.

### Step #3: Dress Rehearsal

Before being allowed to give a formal presentation in front of the entire class, each student is required to make an acceptable score, say 80 percent, on an out-of-class dress rehearsal attended by the instructor and three to five other students currently enrolled in the course. Each dress rehearsal is constructively critiqued and discussed by the audience members followed by a brief conference between the instructor and the presenter. Ideally, each dress rehearsal is videotaped and the tape reviewed with the presenter.

The presenter's grade is assigned and discussed during the latter, private conference between the instructor and presenter. If the dress rehearsal represents the student's first attempt, the grade is an unofficial one used for the purpose of providing the student feedback and to determine if the student qualifies to give a presentation before the class.

The dress rehearsal process helps not only to improve the quality of the subsequent in-class presentations, but also enhances the communication skills of the other students in attendance. Valuable experience is gained in evaluating presentations, offering constructive suggestions, responding to differing viewpoints, and otherwise interacting in the small group setting that resembles the small group meetings faced throughout the students' marketing careers.

### Step #4: A Second Dress Rehearsal

Students scoring below the acceptable standard on their first dress rehearsal are prevented from giving a presentation to the entire class. Rather, they are asked to schedule a second out-of-class dress rehearsal, this time for an official grade. Such an approach guarantees every student the opportunity to benefit from the initial dress rehearsal while also ensuring that only quality presentations will consume valuable class time.

### Step #5: In-Class Presentation

Students surviving the initial dress rehearsal with a satisfactory performance are then allowed to schedule an in-class presentation for an official grade—again, following a "first completed, first

choice" policy to encourage students to stage their dress rehearsals before the deadline. The length of class time allotted to each presentation varies according to class size, of course, but in all instances students are evaluated in terms of how well they *manage* the time available. Specific evaluative criteria and weightings may also vary, of course, depending upon the individual instructor's objectives, but one set of criteria would include the following considerations:

- Identification of the topic's key *principles* or "big ideas"
- Accuracy of the information presented
- Identification of key *trends* in the topic area
- Use of relevant examples—both hypothetical and "real world"
- Ability to involve the class
- Presentation style/demeanor
- Use of visual aids, graphics, handouts, etc.
- Creativity

Students in the audience are encouraged to be attentive to the presenter's presentation style and demonstrated speaking skills, as well as to the content of the presentation which is potential exam fodder. Toward this end, each audience member completes a brief comment sheet regarding the strengths, weaknesses, and appropriate grade for the presentation. Audience members are asked to sign the top margin of the comment sheets, but these margins are later removed before the comment sheets are given to the presenter as additional feedback. The instructor may optionally incorporate the peer evaluations into the assigned grade.

#### Step #6: Written Report.

This final step of having students submit a written report on their topic may or may not be appropriate in all marketing courses or in all institutions. The instructor may want to give students the option of

doing so (as shown in the accompanying exhibit) if one or more of the following conditions exist:

- If students are not required to have taken a public speaking course before enrolling in the marketing course.
- If English is a second language for some students.
- If other assignments such as case analyses and examinations already ensure that the course's writing objectives will be satisfied.
- If illness, emergencies, scheduling conflicts, or other unusual circumstances prevent some students from staging their oral presentations in a timely manner.

### IMPLEMENTATION TIPS

Incorporation of the following suggestions will aid marketing educators in the process of implementing the oral presentation program:

- Spend some class time early in the semester clarifying the concept of "principles." One way to do this is to challenge students to thoroughly familiarize themselves with the topic, and then condense everything they have learned into four to eight key statements, i.e., the principles. Obviously, examples are helpful.
- Spend some class time prior to the dress rehearsals giving students a few basic tips with respect to staging an oral presentation. It is also useful to make additional resources available for students to borrow as needed—such as the self-paced guides by Mandel (*Effective Presentation Skills*, Los Altos, CA: Crisp Publications, 1987) and Raines (*Visual Aides In Business*, Los Altos, CA: Crisp Publications, 1989).
- Make sure students understand the criteria to be used to evaluate their presentations. Consider developing a specific form or check-list to be used for grading purposes and supplying each student with a copy. Development of such a form also speeds the grading process.

- Make available a flowchart or diagram (e.g., accompanying exhibit) outlining the sequence of steps necessary to successfully complete the assignment. This is especially important if students are given options throughout the process. Also, include a list of deadlines for the assignment's specific steps. Such clarification not only assists students' planning, but also reduces the amount of the educator's time otherwise spent clarifying the process orally.
- To further offset the inherently time-consuming nature of this assignment, instructors faced with large sections may consider having an assistant initially screen students' outline—with only those outlines approved by the assistant forwarded to the instructor for final approval.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUDING COMMENTS

It is difficult to argue against the value of oral communication skills for marketing students, or that marketing educators should not take an active role in developing assignments that nurture these skills. However, all assignments are not equally successful in satisfying communication skills objectives. Therefore, this manuscript has described a workable process for enhancing the effectiveness of one type of communication assignment, i.e., student oral presentations.

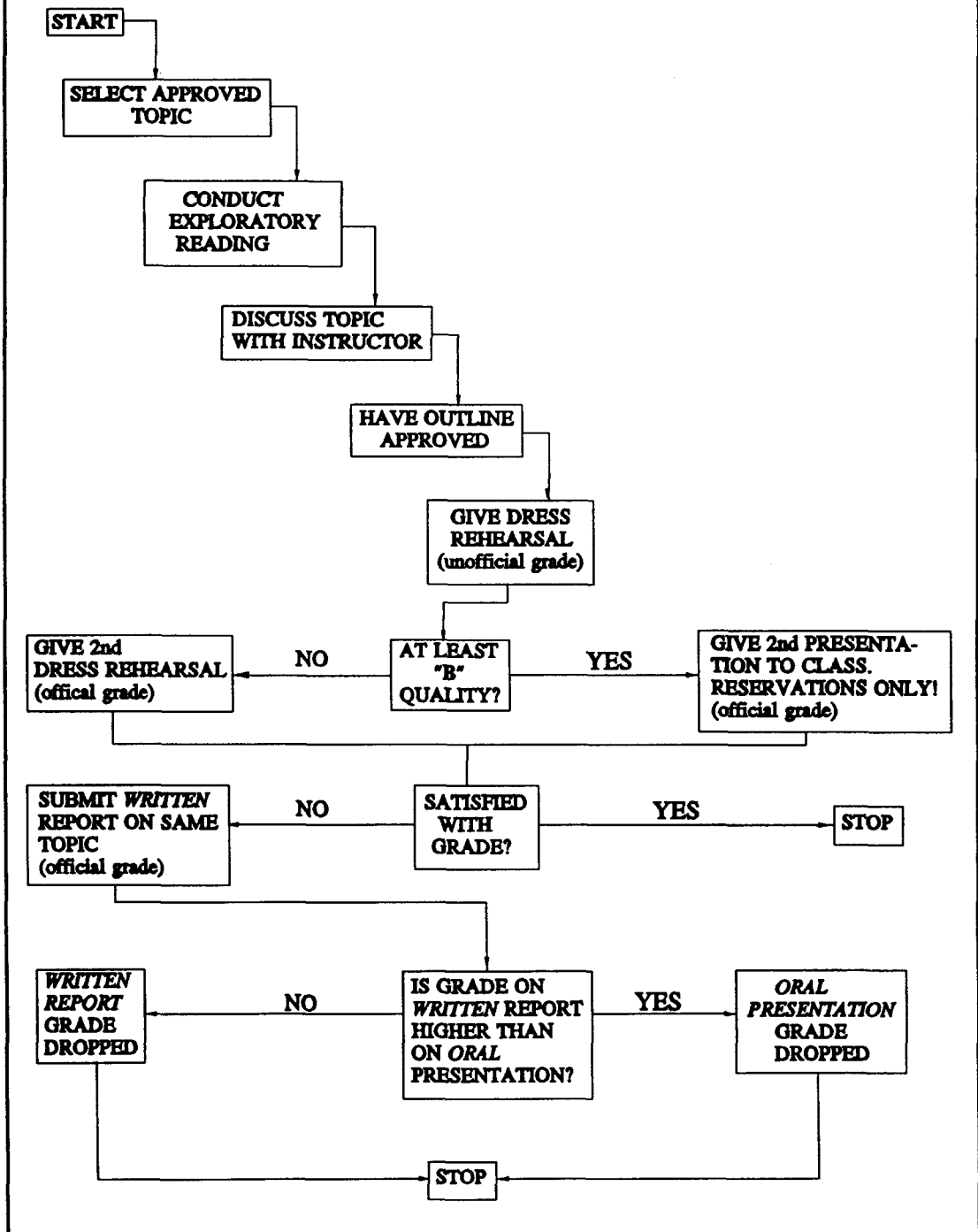
The process requires students to complete a series of steps eventually leading to the successful completion of the assignment. The steps most dramatically effecting the quality of the presentations involve the preparation of an outline identifying the topic's principles, and a dress rehearsal.

Admittedly, the process can be a time consuming one for both students and instructors. For instructors the process requires approximately two hours per student, including interaction time with each student early in the semester, outline evaluation, critique of dress rehearsal and in-class presentations, and possible grading of a written report. However, the results tend to be impressive, with presentation scores averaging 14 percentage points higher in the author's class sections employing the comprehensive process than in the author's sections not using the process. Clearly, the satisfaction derived from observing such student achievement is well worth the time invested.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Interested readers are encouraged to contact the author for a comprehensive review of the literature.

## SEQUENTIAL PROCESS FOR ENHANCED STUDENT PRESENTATIONS



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