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Building Sustainable, Real-World Learning in Digital Marketing: Marketing CAPSTONE Experiential Lab

Overview

At St. Edward's University, experiential learning is more than a teaching method—it's a mission-aligned approach to developing students into ethical, community-minded leaders. In our Marketing Management Capstone (MKTG 4345), we piloted the Digital Marketing Experiential Lab, an innovative platform designed to simulate running a digital marketing agency. Students engaged directly with small businesses in Austin's handicraft and fair trade sectors, promoting sustainability while building real-world experience and portfolio-ready work.

About the Initiative

Originally launched as a pilot in Fall 2024, the experiential lab matured in Spring 2025 into a fully structured, three-phase initiative guided by faculty facilitator Dr. Adesegun Oyedele and supported by volunteer professionals from TSEG Digital Marketing Agency, including Todd Neer (Chief Strategy Officer) and Harith Al Rubaye (Senior Technical Director). Together, this team helped students develop a digital marketing agency—Grow Your Own—with its own mission, vision, and client service offerings. A beta website was built to host the student-created content and document client outcomes. This platform remains live and continues to showcase the students' work.

Three Phases of the Lab

Phase 1: Customer Discovery and Sector Orientation

- Students acted as agency teams tasked with identifying potential small business clients.
- Two focus sectors were selected: handicrafts and fair trade businesses within the Austin community.
- Students evaluated each potential client's digital marketing readiness using a structured rubric.
- Based on findings and relationship potential, each team selected one client to support.
- Deliverables included a short video reflecting client insights and marketing needs.

Phase II: Strategy Development

- With clients selected, teams conducted extensive market research to develop integrated digital marketing plans.
- Students defined target markets, digital positioning, objectives, and selected relevant tactics (e.g., social media, PPC, events).
 - Client Background: Summarizes the client's name, location, years in operation, employee count, offerings, and unique value. Includes a brief industry overview (NAICS), digital presence (website, social media, online/offline sales), and alignment with sustainability goals
 - Market, Customer, and Competitive Analysis: Reviews market trends, customer segmentation (demographic, psychographic, behavioral, geographic), and defines primary and secondary targets using personas. Includes competitor analysis, SWOT, and a positioning statement to clarify brand differentiation

- Client engagement was ongoing to ensure strategy alignment with real needs.

Phase III: Campaign Execution & AI Hackathon Digital Asset Challenge

- Campaign Objectives and Digital Strategy Plan: Outlines clear marketing goals (e.g., awareness, traffic, conversions, sales) and proposed tactics such as social media, PPC, events, and content integration. Highlights how channels will work together and outlines key performance indicators (KPIs) for success.
- Student teams implemented marketing campaigns including local events, social media content, posters, and PPC strategies.
- Each team created a "how-to" video to solve a specific client challenge.
- Campaigns were evaluated using performance metrics: social engagement, event sales, and platform analytics.
- Students participated in an AI Hackathon, producing short promotional videos aligned with their client's sustainability goals.
- *AI Hackathon Guidelines Highlights*
 - Time-limited challenge: 75 minutes total
 - Use of AI tools such as Canva, Pictory, ChatGPT, and InVideo
 - Focused on storytelling around sustainability (cultural, environmental, or economic)
 - Deliverables: short video, social media caption, optional thumbnail
 - Evaluated based on message clarity, AI integration, creativity, and brand alignment

Sustainability and Impact

This model emphasizes sustainable experiential learning by creating repeatable, visible value:

- Students maintain a digital footprint of their work, hosted on a live platform.
- Client testimonials and project visibility enhance student portfolios.
- The platform is refreshed each semester by Dr. Adesegun Oyedele in collaboration with digital marketing agency experts from TSEG, including Todd Neer (Chief Strategy Officer) and Harith Al Rubaye (Senior Technical Director). Dr. Oyedele continues to manage the website to support ongoing pedagogical and research innovation, while a student webmaster—trained by TSEG and guided by faculty—is involved each semester to gain hands-on experience managing and updating the platform.
- The collaboration supports local businesses committed to sustainability.
- *Recognizing Student Contributions:*
 - We would like to recognize the great work of our first student volunteer webmaster, **Lukas Avila**, who helped maintain and update the platform with support from faculty and TSEG experts. We also want to highlight the outstanding effort by the student team that worked with Madeline Park's: **Krista Sayre, Xochitl Lara, Lily Collora, Savanna Puccio**, and **Lukas Avila**. Their project supported the client's sustainability goals and showed strong teamwork, creativity, and commitment.

What's Next: Inspiring and Advancing the Future

This initiative is designed to be adaptable, replicable, and scalable. It highlights the value of academic-industry collaboration, where students, faculty, and industry professionals—including small business clients—co-create real-world learning experiences. These partnerships provide students with practical skills while supporting community-based businesses through meaningful digital marketing engagement.

*For more details, examples of student work, or to collaborate on similar initiatives, please contact Dr. Adesegun Oyedele at St. Edward's University (aoyedele@stedwards.edu) or visit our Digital Marketing Experiential Lab platform: <https://www.gyomarketing.com/>