



A Unifying Textiles and Clothing Course:
Implementing Corporate Aesthetic Management

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Objective

Schmitt, Simonson, and Marcus (1995) noted the estrangement between design and marketing units within a firm, but stressed the importance of their integration for product and firm success. This estrangement is frequently seen in textiles and apparel curriculum, where design and merchandising/marketing are seen as separate specializations, but centrality of aesthetic experience in creation of value through store/brand identity binds design and merchandising/marketing together. With a growing industry focus on branding (Newman & Patel, 2004), textiles and apparel courses should better prepare design and merchandising/marketing students to work together to create brand identity through product and store design.

Schmitt et al. (1995) coined, “Corporate Aesthetic Management” (CAM), as the systematic process where marketing and design units work together to create a unified aesthetic identity for a firm as part of the firm’s branding/marketing strategy. This aesthetic identity entails elements of multi-sensory form, emotional expression, and symbolism, which align with components of Fiore and Kimle’s (1997) aesthetic experience. In Fall 2004, the present author offered a graduate and upper level undergraduate course, which was founded on the CAM process and this broad definition of aesthetic experience, to foster integration of student specializations through creating aesthetic identity of a retail or restaurant small business.



Strategies: From Theory to Practice and Back to Theory

The Fall 2004 course required class discussion of theory and empirical findings from literature and their implications for brand identity. Included in the reading list were: (a) Postrel's (2003) book postulating the recent propagation of the hedonic consumer focused on design and self-expression, (b) empirical atmospherics literature studying the effect of changes in the multi-sensory environment on the consumer, (c) Schmitt and Simonson's (1997) book on using aesthetics in marketing, (d) Goss' (1993) ethnographic analysis of the shopping mall, and (e) Pine and Gilmore's (1999) book on the experience economy.

Students applied knowledge gained from the discussion of the readings during a one-day field trip to a main street shopping district and a new regional mall. A team of students assessed aesthetic identity of a store or restaurant and developed "Best Practice Scrapbooks" that contained successful aesthetic identity practices of businesses that could be incorporated in a later service-learning project.

Guided by the instructor, students drew upon the course literature to formulate an assessment instrument used in a required service-learning project with small businesses of the state's Main Street program. (The Main Street program is part of the National Trust for Historic Preservation and funded by the state's Department of Economic Development.) In line with a CAM approach, students with design, merchandising, marketing, and consumer behavior foci worked together in a team to create a unique, holistic aesthetic identity for a business to positively affect a target market. For the project, students were provided with extensive guidelines for creating a marketing plan. Each student team was required to work with a small business owner in assessing the business and developing an aesthetic identity. Students consulted with an advisory panel of faculty in Interior Design and Main Street program professionals during the process to help ensure quality proposals. Each team presented an oral and visual aesthetic identity proposal to an audience of participating business owners and other community members. Each team provided a written proposal to the business owner. To bring this practical application back to development of theory, each team developed a paper proposing an empirical study of the success of the aesthetic identity, if adopted by the business.



Effectiveness and Plans to Continue

Assessments of presentations by an advisory panel of faculty, business owners, Main Street program professionals, and general audience members showed that teams were successful at proposing a creative, unified aesthetic identity for the business that worked for the specified target market. Student journals suggested that the service-learning experience was successful in helping them understand and apply information gained from the readings and discussion as well as work with students with different academic backgrounds. Journals and course evaluations revealed that students believed that working with business owners and presentations to the audience enhanced their professional and communication skills. Course evaluations were positive, with the major concern that the service-learning project should be started earlier in the semester. This, and other smaller concerns, will be addressed when the course is offered in Fall 2005. A website for instructors, students, and business owners is being developed that contains materials from the course, including reading lists, assessment instruments, and student projects. Development of the course and website is funded by a federal grant.

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