

# Multicultural student teams for marketing projects with companies

Pirkko Varis

The article describes some opportunities that multicultural student teams offer to companies, especially small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) when doing marketing projects in cooperation with companies. It also deals with the experiences and benefits gained by both companies and students as well as challenges in cooperation with companies and some solutions. Furthermore, the article discusses cultural diversity and aspects of cross-cultural communication in multicultural marketing projects.



*PICTURE 1. Pirkko Varis and all participants happy with tourism marketing communications campaigns. Photo: Richard Berry, Southampton Solent University, UK 2015*

## Marketing projects and multicultural student teams

There are several types of marketing projects with companies where multicultural student teams are involved. In this article Tampere University of Applied Sciences serves as an example. TAMK is a regional and multidisciplinary higher education institution, operating in the city of Tampere, in the Tampere region, nationally and internationally, and it offers education in several fields of study. There is a close cooperation between education and research, development and innovation (RDI) services. The following are some of the projects with companies TAMK has played key roles: business, product/service and event innovations; market, distribution channel and customer satisfaction surveys; distribution channel contacts; business environment analyses; business and marketing plans; product and marketing material design; planning international marketing and marketing communications mix and campaigns; design of digital and social media for marketing; international trade fairs; event management and marketing; business cultures and how to do business in various market areas; customer contacts; training. Exchanges, internships, theses, international courses and projects and other forms of operation offer possibilities for cooperation with companies.

When the companies decide to go for international markets, they must decide which markets to enter, how to enter, what kind of adaptation to the products/services has to be done, how to adapt their integrated marketing communications to different cultures and how to deal with all other

aspects of international business and marketing. (Kotler et al. 2012, 19; Smith & Taylor 2006, 8, 16, 19-21, 40.)

For more than ten years TAMK has coordinated intensive courses. In LLP Erasmus & Nordic and Baltic Business Innovation Network intensive courses student teams have done business/marketing innovations and designed marketing communications campaigns for SMEs. Some courses have focused on online business and on combining traditional, digital, mobile and social media for marketing. Some examples of international courses including marketing projects are mentioned in the following: “TRADIGME – Tradigital Media Marketing & Online Business with Social Media”([www.tamk.fi/tradigme](http://www.tamk.fi/tradigme)), “Business Innovation Focused on Experience-based Products/Services” ([www.tamk.fi/nordicbalticbu2014](http://www.tamk.fi/nordicbalticbu2014)), “Customized product/service innovation & marketing through traditional, digital and social media” ([www.tamk.fi/nordicbalticbu2015](http://www.tamk.fi/nordicbalticbu2015)) and many marketing communications courses.



*PICTURE. Students, Pirkko Varis and Virrat bear searching for new ideas. Photo: Christian Reimann, FH Dortmund, Germany 2014*

## **Benefits to companies and students**

Multicultural student teams provide the companies with several benefits. The companies give marketing project assignments to the teams and as a result they present ideas, new approaches, proposals and solutions for the business and marketing purposes. Many benefits of multicultural student teams are related to cultural aspects and a multitude of different approaches and views to the issues in question.

There have been several learning outcomes for students as a result from marketing projects. Students have learned subject-related issues, teamwork, intercultural communication, business, entrepreneurial, negotiation, presentation and many other professional key skills and through this they have been able to develop key competencies for working life. A lot of networking has developed, too. One outcome is the enthusiasm and fun associated with the entire project, producing excellent results for all. Here are some student comments:

“I will remember the project as an opportunity for networking, friendships, knowledge and lifelong experiences. The teamwork between people from different backgrounds gave me several impressions and enlightened solutions in different perspectives. Working in a team with different people was hard, but it was really interesting to see how people approached the project.”

“It was a perfect marketing project which allowed to incorporate many ideas and advised the company the best solutions to a problem. Working in an international team was a great experience because all of us had different views, ideas and personalities. As a result, we presented our ideas to the company representatives.”

“I would say that the marketing project was meaningful for everyone. It gave us practical team working skills and awareness of other cultures. I would recommend the intensive course for everyone.”

“Particularly interesting to observe was the interaction between management, business, marketing and IT people. Due to the different points of view, new ideas were developed and also impressive results were created.”

“The marketing project was a great success, there was a lot to learn and even more important, it was a lot of fun. We built up some long lasting friendships. This was one of the most amazing experiences of my life.”



*PICTURE 3. A lot of potential for SMEs – all ready for work by a lake in Virrat. Photo: Pia Dag 2012*

## **Multicultural student teams and cooperation with companies – challenges and some solutions**

There are many challenges involved in cooperation of multicultural student teams with companies, especially with SMEs. Many SMEs do not have enough knowledge about the expertise of the universities of applied sciences and their staff and students of various cultural backgrounds. SMEs give assignments and marketing projects to work on and they sometimes wait for concrete applicable results within a very short timeframe.

When SMEs give assignments to student teams of HEIs the interest already is high. There might still arise difficulties, for example concerning the schedule. Deadlines are often very strict. The staff of the SME is so occupied with its daily tasks that it might be difficult to have time for meetings and guidance. As a consequence some important aspects might be ignored or they might be tackled insufficiently. It is important to plan the meetings very carefully. Time concept and attitude to deadlines vary between cultures. When representatives from various companies, disciplines and cultures participate in international marketing projects it often is difficult to find a common understanding, and anyway this takes time.

Interpretations of concepts and the content of the marketing project may be very different among the participants. In addition, various cultural backgrounds have impact on the ways people act and react. Listening habits, communication patterns and relation to silence are different in various cultures. (Lewis 2006, 67-71.) These issues should be taken into consideration. A lot of time is needed for discussions and clarifications and a lot of communication is needed. The command of the language used may cause problems. The interpretation of nonverbal communication is important but difficult. Hierarchies and the status of the decision-makers and the roles of the persons taking part in the decision-making are different in different cultures and this might have as a consequence problems and obstacles to achieve the results. Individualistic and collectivistic decision-making processes and styles are very different from each other and this leads to different ways of action. The differences between task-oriented and relations-oriented people have to be taken into consideration. It is important that project members get to know each other. There is a need for extensive communication. (Schneider & Barsoux 2003, 221-222, 248; Deresky 2006, 123-135; Griffin & Pustay 2005, 428-440.)

People managing international marketing projects require project management skills, including also cross-cultural communication skills. Management and leadership skills required for managing and leading cross-cultural teams can be developed. (The AMA Handbook of Project Management 2006, 8, 17; Deresky 2006, 119-120; Griffin & Pustay 2005, 441-443.) It is useful to understand the impact of cultural factors on various issues and especially on business communication. It is important to be aware of issues related to cross-cultural communication and to acquire training in cross-cultural communication.

### **About the author**



**Pirkko Varis**, M.Sc. in Econ. & Business Administration, is Senior Lecturer in Marketing at Tampere University of Applied Sciences. She has been involved in developing international marketing and marketing communications of SMEs for many years. She is the coordinator of several intensive programmes and courses, too.

pirkko.varis@tamk.fi

## References

The AMA Handbook of Project Management, edited by Dinsmore, P.C. & Cabanis-Brewin, J. 2006. Second Edition. New York: Amacom.

Deresky, H. 2006. International Management. Managing Across Borders and Cultures. Fifth Edition. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Education, Inc.

Griffin, R.W. & Pustay, M.W. 2005. International Business. A Managerial Perspective. Fourth Edition. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Education, Inc.

Kotler, P., Keller, K.L., Brady, M., Goodman, M. & Hansen, T. 2012. Marketing Management. 2nd ed. Essex: Pearson Education Limited.

Lewis, R.D. 2006. When Cultures Collide. Leading Across Cultures. 3rd ed. London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing.

Schneider, S. C. & Barsoux, J-L. 2003. Managing Across Cultures. London: Prentice Hall.

Smith, P.R. & Taylor, J. 2006. Marketing Communications. An Integrated Approach. 4th Edition. London: Kogan Page.

[www.tamk.fi](http://www.tamk.fi)

[www.tamk.fi/tradigme](http://www.tamk.fi/tradigme)

[www.tamk.fi/nordicbalticbu2014](http://www.tamk.fi/nordicbalticbu2014)

[www.tamk.fi/nordicbalticbu2015](http://www.tamk.fi/nordicbalticbu2015)