Strategic Approaches to Online MBA Instruction: A Roadmap for Delivering Marketing Strategy in the Online MBA Curriculum

Mee-Shew Cheung[1], Hema Krishnan[1] & Mina Lee[1]

[1] Xavier University, Cincinnati, Ohio, USA

Correspondence: Mee-Shew Cheung, Xavier University, 3800 Victory Parkway ML 1214, Cincinnati, Ohio 45207, USA Tel: 1-513-745-3058. E-mail: cheungm@xavier.edu

Abstract

The online MBA enrollment trend has been on the rise even before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020. The pandemic further accelerated this shift, with more prospective students considering remote study options. This poses a challenge for universities in preparing faculty for online instruction, given that instructors often lack prior exposure to online learning. The emergence of generative AI, such as ChatGPT, introduces a new technological dimension, prompting concerns about academic integrity. The paper provides strategic and practical approaches and resources for teaching an asynchronous online MBA marketing strategy course, addressing common challenges faced by instructors. It offers valuable insights into course content, assignments, time management, and integrating generative AI in the course. It aims to help marketing and management educators proficiently develop and implement comparable courses, especially those transitioning from traditional to online instruction.

Keywords: MBA, marketing education, pedagogical approaches, online teaching, generative AI

1. Introduction

The online MBA enrollment trend has been on the rise even before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020. GMAC (2021) reported that 23% of MBA candidates express interest in online learning. AACSB survey results indicate a notable increase in business schools offering at least one online MBA program, growing from 22% in 2014-2015 to 39% in the 2019-2020 academic year (Moules, 2021). The pandemic has further propelled interest in online study options among prospective students, particularly managers seeking career advancement without compromising their current roles (Murray, 2018). Business schools anticipate a sustained demand for remote learning (Schwartz et al., 2020), necessitating reconsidering the risks of solely relying on traditional face-to-face instruction in an era of great uncertainty.

Advancements in technology have greatly enhanced the immersive nature of online teaching and learning. The entry of esteemed institutions into the online MBA sphere has bolstered the credibility of these programs, resulting in a surge in applications (Diaz-Infante et al., 2022; Moules, 2021). Moreover, online programs are uniquely positioned to mirror contemporary management practices, catering to executives navigating global landscapes through digital platforms (Murray, 2018).

The surge in online MBA enrollment challenges educational institutions to equip faculty with the necessary skills for effective online instruction. Many instructors accustomed to face-to-face teaching need more proficiency in online formats (Osika, Johnson, & Buteau, 2009). These challenges encompass a range of factors, including instructors' limited exposure to online learning during their own education, their comfort level with technology, and their perceptions of the value of online education (Osika et al., 2009). Inadequate training for transitioning from traditional to online teaching further compounds the issue (Baran, Correia & Thompson, 2011). The time demands on instructors for online class preparation and delivery are substantial (Capra, 2011; Humphries, 2010). As with any acquired skill, proficiency in online teaching requires training and investment of time (Whalen, 2020).

To these established challenges, a new technological hurdle has arisen from the widespread adoption of generative AI, such as ChatGPT, since its introduction in November 2022. Notably, the potential for students to misuse ChatGPT for cheating in online assessments is a significant concern (Susnjak, 2022). Eke (2023) concludes that ChatGPT usage could undermine academic integrity. However, the emergence of ChatGPT and similar generative AI will not

halt the progress of online education. In one study, 61% of students considered generative AI the new norm (Nietzel, 2023). Instructors must grapple with generative AI's practical integration and responsible use in their teaching methodologies.

This paper offers insights into strategic and practical approaches and resources in an asynchronous online MBA marketing strategy course. It addresses challenges instructors commonly face during the transition to this teaching format, providing specifics on content, sequencing, materials, assignments, and time management. It proposes effective integration methods for generative AI. The paper aims to assist marketing and management educators in proficiently developing and implementing comparable courses, especially those transitioning from traditional to online instruction.

The paper begins with a review of pertinent literature concerning challenges encountered by instructors in online settings. Subsequently, it provides a detailed roadmap for developing and executing a marketing strategy course within an MBA program, demonstrating its effectiveness in alleviating identified challenges. Additionally, student feedback and comments offer valuable insights. The paper contextualizes our teaching experience within existing research and suggests potential implications for instructors and institutions. Readers are welcome to contact the authors for a copy of the syllabus with detailed descriptions of the assignments and the grading rubrics.

2. Literature Review

Significant research has delved into the complexities of online education. Kebritchi et al. (2017) employed Cooper's framework (1988) to identify and categorize critical issues into three domains: online learners, instructors, and content development. This encompassed learners' expectations, readiness, identity, and participation in online courses. Challenges arise in managing learners' expectations, potentially impacting the efficacy of online instruction (Luyt, 2013). Additionally, learners' readiness to actively engage in online courses emerges as a substantial concern (Hung et al., 2010). Online learners must be self-motivated and self-directed to attain desired learning outcomes, placing an added responsibility on instructors.

Online learning environments grant learners greater autonomy over their educational journey, enabling customization in pacing, sequencing, and content consumption (Kebritchi et al., 2017). Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that learners may grapple with feelings of isolation and detachment in this context (McInnerny & Roberts, 2004). To address this, Goodyear and Zenios (2007) underscore the significance of nurturing a sense of belonging within the knowledge community for effective knowledge acquisition. Koole (2014) introduces a Web of Identity model to facilitate this belongingness.

Regarding learner participation in online courses, instructors play a pivotal role in fostering interactions among peers and themselves. It is imperative not to assess participation solely based on the volume or length of online contributions (Kebritchi et al., 2017).

As for course content, instructors often need help transitioning material from traditional classrooms to online settings and frequently find training and support insufficient (Kyei-Blankson & Keengwe, 2011). This task, whether involving the creation of new content or adaptation from in-person formats, can be formidable (Li & Irby, 2008). Best practices recommend incorporating diverse, engaging methods beyond text alone, such as collaborative and reflective activities, clear assessment criteria, and the strategic integration of technology (Niess & Gillow-Wilse, 2013).

In online teaching, instructor challenges encompass evolving roles, transitioning to digital platforms, time management, and instructional methods. Berge (1998) outlines four roles for online instructors: pedagogical, social, managerial, and technical. Research by Juan et al. (2011) suggests a shift towards facilitation rather than knowledge transmission. This implies a move from lecture-style teaching to a more guiding approach (Coppola et al., 2001). Crawley et al. (2009) note that instructors struggle with content delivery and engagement without face-to-face interaction. This hinders their prompt response to student cues (Coppola et al., 2001). Studies emphasize the substantial time investment required for online teaching. Cavanaugh (2005) reports that preparing and delivering online courses demands twice the effort compared to traditional instruction. This workload can deter faculty from online teaching (Crawley et al., 2009). Notably, the instructor significantly impacts student success in the online environment (Tunks, 2012). Recent research on online MBA courses highlights the influential role of teaching presence in perceived learning outcomes (Arbaugh, 2014). Despite these findings, educators transitioning to online teaching may face challenges in preparation (Baran et al., 2011).

The next section of the paper summarizes the strategic approaches used by the authors to address the issues and challenges in online teaching and learning. The authors present a roadmap for developing and implementing a

marketing strategy class in an MBA online program. We share a detailed description of the course module sequencing, learning objectives, course material, and assignments.

3. Addressing the Issues and Challenges in Online Teaching and Learning

Drawing on prior research (Jacobs, 2014; Niess & Gillow-Wiles, 2013; Strang, 2011; Shi et al., 2006; Morrison, 2012), institutional training, collaborative learning, student feedback, and the authors' collective fifteen-year online teaching tenure in diverse business domains, this paper provides practical insights and strategic approaches for instructing an online MBA marketing strategy course. Key challenges in online education encompass learner expectations, readiness, identity, participation, course content, evolving instructor roles, time management, and teaching presence. A novel challenge arises from integrating technologies such as generative AI, which is discussed in detail in Table 1.

Table 1. Strategic Approaches in Addressing Online Teaching & Learning Challenges

Online teaching and learning challenges	*Strategic approaches to addressing the challenge*
• Learners' expectations and readiness – learners may lack self-motivation and readiness to participate in an online course (Hung et al., 2010).	• Two weeks before the course, students get a welcome email with the syllabus, schedule, and instructor's advice for success. It includes tips from former students to help newcomers prepare.
• Learners' identity and participation – learners may feel isolated and disconnected in online courses (McInnerny & Roberts, 2004)	• Email students to emphasize active participation in the knowledge community and regular interaction. • Content delivery emphasizes self-paced and group learning through various activities.
• Course content – instructors did not receive proper training or support in transitioning course content from the traditional classroom setting to the online setting (Kyei-Blankson & Keengwe, 2011)	• Diversify engagement with multimedia, extra readings, and collaborative projects alongside regular textbook assignments. Activities encompass essays, reflections and discussions, case analysis, and an extended group project.
• Instructors' changing role and struggles – from a knowledge transmission agent to a specialist to guide students' learning process (Juan et al., 2011). • They have less control over how to make adjustments in classes when they cannot take cues from students' verbal and nonverbal interactions in a traditional classroom (Coppola et al., 2001).	• Implement weekly reflections and discussions for engagement tracking. • Utilize rubrics and personalized feedback to boost student participation. • Monitor activity through the LMS. • Email underperforming students for individual coaching sessions via calls or Zoom.
• Instructors' time management challenge: It can take instructors two times as long to prepare and teach online than face-to-face (Cavanaugh, 2005). • Instructors have to play multiple roles: pedagogical, social, managerial, and technical support (Berge, 1998).	• Provide an FAQ covering orientation topics such as technical skills, support services, netiquette, time management, and policies on academic integrity. • Supply a detailed syllabus and schedule for students to identify skill-demanding activities, aiding workload management. • Develop feedback rubrics for efficient grading and clear assignment expectations, improving output quality. • Utilize the Announcement section or emails for common topics, saving time and enabling reuse in future sections. • Pre-plan and post all course materials, allowing more focus on teaching and interaction, with potential for re-use in future courses.

• Instructor's teaching presence (Arbaugh, 2014)	• Post a personal introduction video on the course website for a connection with students. • Outline the instructor's role and commitments. • Deliver personalized feedback on student work. • Enable various interaction methods: email, online meetings, calls, and on-campus meetings at student-friendly times.
• Keeping the integrity of the course upon the rise of generative AI (Eke, 2023)	• Produce a video outlining prohibited use of generative AI to prevent cheating. • Employ oral exams if cheating is suspected (Susnjak, 2022). • Utilize ChatGPT detectors, such as GPTZero. • Employ live Zoom sessions for knowledge assessment, not content delivery.
• Embracing Generative AI in the course (Roose, 2023; Mollick and Mollick, 2023)	• Require students to critique AI-generated outputs (e.g., SWOT analysis) to evaluate critical thinking, data handling, and strategy integration skills.
• Learner's inability to write with proper sources.	• Utilize institutional resources to ease faculty workload. • Collaborate with librarians to introduce students to valuable, underutilized research databases, encouraging direct interaction for assistance and minimizing faculty Q&A time.

4. Description of the Online Course

This MBA course, "Marketing Strategy," is a three-credit hour program delivered entirely online in an asynchronous format over eight weeks. It was introduced in the fall of 2016 and has undergone continuous refinement over nearly twenty semesters. Approximately 600 MBA students have completed this online course, achieving learning outcomes comparable to, if not surpassing, those in traditional on-campus sections. The institution utilizes Canvas as the learning management system, with class sizes typically ranging from 20 to 25 students. The student demographic is notably diverse, encompassing various undergraduate majors, organizational backgrounds, and functional expertise. "Marketing Strategy" is mandatory for students pursuing a general MBA degree.

5. Course Design: Learning Objectives, Material, and Assignments

This MBA course provides a practical foundation in marketing management, emphasizing its critical role in creating, communicating, and delivering customer value. It cultivates students' ability to discern market opportunities and threats while evaluating the alignment between firms and potential markets. Through conceptual frameworks and tools, students develop the analytical and creative prowess needed to identify growth and innovation avenues in a dynamic business landscape.

The curriculum employs an integrated approach, combining textbook study, supplementary readings, media resources, reflective discussions, case analysis, online meetings, and crafting a marketing strategy post comprehensive environmental analysis. Students are encouraged to work independently while actively engaging in group activities.

The course spans eight modules, outlined in Table 2, which details module themes, objectives, materials, and assignments. Students engage in reflective analysis of assigned articles, videos, and textbook readings weekly. They share their insights on the discussion board, comparing and contrasting ideas across materials. Each post must also incorporate personal experiences and pose a question to foster discussion. Additionally, they respond to at least two classmates' posts, fostering meaningful dialogue. This exercise sharpens critical thinking and encourages a multidimensional perspective.

Next, students tackle Textbook Chapter Essays, responding to various prompts after reviewing the assigned reading and instructor lecture. This tool reinforces fundamental marketing principles and allows for practical application.

Throughout the course, students confront multiple marketing cases, showcasing their ability to identify challenges, conduct strategic analyses, and propose actionable solutions.

The final phase centers on an experiential project employing generative AI. Students, in groups, analyze the macro-environment for a chosen firm and present a marketing strategy for enhanced success. This practical assignment solidifies course learning. Students are asked to justify their proposed marketing strategy for the selected firm by providing the appropriate theoretical, strategic, and data support. Students also critique the comprehensive analyses and marketing plan generated by generative AI, demonstrating proficiency in data collection, critical thinking, and strategic integration.

Table 2. A Sample Course Schedule

Module	Topics / Material	Activities and Assignments	Due Date
1	Theme: Marketing and the Firm	Live Zoom Lecture and Introduction	Monday
	Aaker/Moorman Ch. 1-2	Textbook Chapter Essays	Friday
2	Theme: Competitor and Market Analysis	Live Zoom Lecture	Monday
	Aaker/Moorman Ch. 3-4	Textbook Chapter Essays	Tuesday
	Article: "Better Customer Insight: In Real Time" (MacDonald, Wilson, and Konus, 2012)	Reflection/Integration/Discussion – initial post	Friday
	Article: "In Market Research, Use Numbers with Caution" (Anthony, 2009)	Reflection/Integration/Discussion – response posts	Sunday
	Harvard Case: Toyota Prius (Reinhardt, Yao, & Egawa, 2006)	Case Analysis	Sunday
3	Theme: Environmental Analysis and Customer Value	Live Zoom Lecture	Monday
	Aaker/Moorman Ch. 5-6	Textbook Chapter Essays	Tuesday
	Article: "An Anthropologist Walks into a Bar" (Madsbjerg & Rasmussen, 2014)	Reflection/Integration/Discussion – initial post	Friday
		Reflection/Integration/Discussion – response posts	Sunday
	Harvard Case: Ikea in India (Medhi, Nafees, & Bhagavath, 2018)	Case Analysis	Sunday
4	Theme: Customers as valuable assets	Live Zoom Lecture	Monday
	Aaker/Moorman Ch. 7-8	Textbook Chapter Essays	Tuesday
	Video Lecture: "A Conversation with Jeff Marcoux"	Reflection/Integration/Discussion – initial post	Friday
		Reflection/Integration/Discussion – response posts	Sunday

5	Theme: Building an enduring brand	Live Zoom Lecture	Monday
	Aaker/Moorman Ch. 9-10	Textbook Chapter Essays	Tuesday
	Article: "Marketing in the Age of Resistance" (Alemany, 2020).	Reflection/Integration/Discussion – initial post	Friday
		Reflection/Integration/Discussion – response posts	Sunday
	Harvard Case: Reed Supermarket (Quelch & Carlson, 2011)	Case Analysis	Sunday
6	Theme: Strategies for business growth	Live Zoom Lecture	Monday
	Aaker/Moorman Ch. 11-12	Textbook Chapter Essays	Tuesday
	Article: "The 10 Principles of Modern Marketing" Lewnes & Keller (2019)	Reflection/Integration/Discussion – initial post	Friday
		Reflection/Integration/Discussion – response posts	Sunday
		Work on Marketing Strategy Project	
7	Theme: Marketing's Role in the Society	Live Zoom Lecture	Monday
	Review strategic statement and marketing plan from Big Brothers Big Sisters (a not-for-profit organization)	Reflection/Integration/Discussion – initial post	Friday
		Reflection/Integration/Discussion – response posts	Sunday
		Work on Marketing Strategy Project	
8	Theme: Experiential Learning – The Marketing Strategy Project: conduct an environmental, competitive, and SWOT analysis for Fitbit; propose a new marketing strategy for the firm for greater success.	Live Zoom Lecture	Monday
		Marketing Strategy Project	Friday

6. Elevating Student Learning With AI

If used correctly and meaningfully, AI can help students succeed in their studies and better prepare them for their futures. We followed the recommendations by Mollick and Mollick (2023) and incorporated the use of AI in the marketing strategy project to enhance learning. We set a clear classroom policy that offers guidance for acceptable use. We made it clear that students cannot simply turn in the AI output for the assignment. We emphasized the need to use AI as a tool to learn, not just to produce content. Students are graded on their ability to include their thoughts and ideas and integrate content from the course materials. To get students to practice critical thinking and engage meaningfully and more deeply with course content, we required students to demonstrate their ability to critique the

AI-generated output. Students are reminded not to trust anything generated by AI. They are required to check with other sources for data accuracy.

7. Key Learnings From Students' Comments and Feedback

The authors have significantly benefited from their learning after multiple years of teaching this course online. Our learning has been ongoing, from conducting research in online teaching, participating in online teaching workshops, and collaborating with colleagues. We are highly conscientious in gathering students' feedback and are guided by their comments to improve the course offering. Their most recent comments and feedback are summarized in Table 3. It covers three main categories: course structure and format, Course content and materials, and Course assignments. The common themes from the feedback include: quality online teaching involves instructors' commitment to offering frequent and customized modes of communication to meet students' needs and complete dedication on the instructor's part to continuously provide updated materials to meet the needs of the students and the learning goals.

Table 3. Key Learnings from Students' Comments and Feedback

Category	Instructors' Intentional Measures & Designs	Students' responses in course evaluation
Course Structure and Organization	• Offer eight sequential modules	"The structure of the modules made sense and built upon one another."
	• Spread out assignments that follow a repetitive structure weekly	"The way the modules are setup encourage thoughtful analysis of the concepts from the chapter."
	• Provide customized summaries of the material for each module.	"For a short class, it was very well laid out. It was divided into relatable topics that are connected in different layers."
		"Breadth of subject manner taught in a way that makes it digestable."
		"Online format done in a way that is effective."
Course Content and Materials	• Offer multiple forms of learning materials that include: textbooks, academic articles, managerial commentaries, short video clips, current event articles, and links to industry and consumer databases • • Focus on continuous improvement every semester	"The course was very in-depth and worth the time to take. This one is by far one of the best. It is challenging yet rewarding at the same time." "This course gave me a well-rounded understanding of marketing strategy and was presented in a way that forces you to learn and retain the information being studied." "I am really glad I decided to take marketing strategy. I felt the subject matter was very relevant and usable in real-world applications."
Course Assignments	• Include an array of assignments at individual and team level with focus on competence building, application • Provide very descriptive guidelines and instructions for each assignment • Provide a rubric for each assignment • Share exemplary work but	"The group project was a great summary of the course learnings." "You can gain a deep knowledge about marketing. Meet a lot of perspectives from other students through discussions." "… The format was perfect for an online class. There wasn't too much work to the point where I wasn't able to really digest what I was learning. Watching supported videos and

		modify requirements every semester	posting to the discussion board allowed me to apply what I learned in a group setting. Reading other's discussions and responding meant I was able to read unique viewpoints of my classmates and also interact in an online class, which I always appreciate. While the final project was a lot of work, I like that we were given a full week to work on it without any other coursework. This ensured we were able to complete a quality project. I also appreciate how clear the grading was laid out."
Instructor's Role and Commitment	• Give timely, in-depth, meaningful, constructive, positive feedback • Be a coach and facilitator • Offer office hours and online tutorials to groups and individual students • Communicate with students regularly using multiple methods that are adapted to students' specific needs.		"The instructor follows the syllabus but allows flexibility to meet students' needs." "The Professor is extremely available, helpful, and consistently follows up promptly." "The instructor was very organized and thorough with explanations and expectations." "The instructor was a great professor who genuinely cares about her students and the subject she teaches. She explained assignments and instructions in detail and was clear. Although this was an online class she made me work just as hard as any in-person class and dedicate time to really understanding the material."

8. Reflection and Conclusion

The feedback and evaluation from students for the course described in this paper have been overwhelmingly positive. While students are expected to put tremendous energy and commitment into the course, instructors must also step up. Instructors must invest time and effort to conduct an online course properly and effectively. Online teaching has challenges, especially in the short term, but it can be gratifying in the long run. Instructors teaching online courses are encouraged to collaborate with peers to shorten the learning curve.

Prior research has shown that the instructor is the most critical factor in determining student success in an online class (Tunks, 2012). Preparing faculty to teach online is thus a vital step to ensure the success and sustainability of the program. The authors' account of developing and implementing this course shows that preparing for online teaching goes far beyond technology training. For online instructors, the relationship between the technologies, pedagogies, and content in the online teaching context is highly complex (Ching et al., 2015). Institutions offering online courses must provide instructors with appropriate training and extensive support, including up-to-date technology, facilities, and subscriptions to top-quality learning materials and research databases for faculty and students.

This study has implications for instructors who wish to expand into online teaching and who have established a skill set in online education. For the former, first, recognition of the significant challenges highlighted in this study, and second, forging connections with a peer group of instructors in their institution and the online community can be beneficial. Thirdly, participating in online teaching workshops offered by their institutions and attending conferences and seminars offered by their discipline can help strengthen their online teaching skills. Fourth, before designing and teaching their first online course, it can be beneficial to observe an online class offered by a colleague as a "guest" or as a teacher who is "non-evaluative." Since online teaching is still evolving, sharing best practices can serve to strengthen collaboration among the faculty.

The implications for instructors with established skill sets in online teaching are favorable. Not only do these faculty benefit from learning curve effects, but they can also direct their efforts toward constructing pedagogical research studies from their experiences. Recent developments in pedagogical research indicate that in all business disciplines,

many high-quality journals seek such submissions from their readers. Publishing pedagogy pieces in quality journals allows the instructor to display their teaching methods while simultaneously allowing reflection on one's style and approach. In conclusion, since online education will grow faster than traditional teaching, especially in graduate programs, faculty may consider adding an online class to their teaching portfolio if the necessary infrastructure and resources are in place.

Authors' contributions

All authors contributed equally to the study and read and approved the final manuscript.

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The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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