

Use of Clickers: Initial Thoughts

By Don Sutherland

During the current semester, I have introduced clickers for the first time to my BBA 407 Strategic Management course. With the dedicated and invaluable assistance of Lehman College's Associate Director of Online Education, Alyson Vogel, my students have all been assigned their own clicker, have learned how to operate them, and have had their first experience doing so in a classroom setting.

My clicker questions fell into two categories:

- Concepts that required students to go beyond textbook definitions or descriptions, as a first step toward learning to apply various principles and theories.
- Content from a real world company to encourage students to begin to think about what they are learning in class and to apply that thought in a practical setting.

With respect to the first category of questions, I asked my students to determine which, among a number of principles, "best explains" corporate strategy. In all of my classes, there has been a common tendency among students to oversimplify situations and concepts and embrace the notion that there is, therefore, a single best solution.

In reality, the world in which companies operate is dynamic and complex with more than a share of uncertainty. Approaches or businesses models that work well in one situation can become irrelevant as conditions change. A company's resources and capabilities can preclude its ability to pursue a course of action that might be available to one of its competitors. Information is typically incomplete and judgments need to be developed from the information that is available. Hence, "silver bullets" are more myth than reality. Instead, elements of frameworks all have applicability, with external conditions and internal capabilities influencing the mix.

True to form, there was a strong consensus with more than three quarters of students declaring that the "best" approach was one where a company had to adapt to its environment. The underlying assumption was that companies were essentially swept along by external developments and their success depended on their ability to cope with those developments. A much smaller share of students suggested that the "best" approach was one where companies could shape the environments in which they operate. In fact, as it was revealed during the discussion that ensued, all those elements apply, even as they vary from company to company, industry to industry, and over time. Companies need to adapt to some aspects of their environment e.g., demographic change. Companies can also influence some aspects of their environment e.g., through advertising aimed at influencing customer preferences. They must also deal with chaotic or uncertain developments e.g., economic shocks.

The second category of question quoted excerpts from two past 10-K reports from Radio Shack, with the company name being kept anonymous given recent headlines. The excerpts discussed what the company's management felt were the "primary factors" that differentiated it from its

competitors. The excerpts were almost identical with the exception that the latter 10-K report omitted language about a “proven ability to accelerate the adoption rate of new technologies.”

Given this information, students were asked whether the slightly different narratives provided insight into the company’s overall competitiveness: did the company’s competitiveness increase, remain about the same, decrease, or was there insufficient information?

Responses were distributed fairly evenly. After students had a chance to discuss the question with one another, there was a modest uptick in the number of students correctly suggesting that the company’s competitiveness had decreased.

Afterward, students were asked to look closely at the statements and consider that one factor of differentiation had been eliminated. Then they were asked to consider whether the eliminated factor might be important, in general, especially in the context of online retailing and the rise of such devices as tablets and smartphones. They were informed that technological change can have different impacts on different industries and that in the company’s particular industry “rapid consumer acceptance of new digital technology products” had a large influence. Only at the end, were they informed that the company, in fact, was Radio Shack. The important takeaway was that students needed to pay close attention to the information that they were given and to think about the value of that information. As one factor that the company had considered relevant to its competitiveness had been removed from its 10-K discussion, it was imperative that students consider whether or not that change was significant.

In the weeks ahead, students will continue to have opportunities to utilize clickers. Instruction will focus on issues identified from the near real-time data of student thinking. Afterward, student performance on those conceptual areas on the Mid-Term exam will be compared with the results from earlier classes. In theory, increased student engagement and increased attention to rapidly-identified areas of challenge should yield better outcomes.