Traffick Jam: A Real-World Sustainable Marketing Laboratory Eight Years Strong

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Through a service-learning project that is embedded in two consecutive required courses of the marketing major, Mercer’s marketing students, under the leadership of professor Dr. Tammy Crutchfield, have built and maintain the social brand, Traffick Jam to teach teens “how to drive out sex trafficking.”   The mission of Traffick Jam is to prevent youth from being sold for sexual purposes (trafficked).  Traffick Jam was birthed in 2014 through the yearlong marketing capstone experience (Marketing Research and Marketing Strategy).  Marketing students were tasked with taking the Anti-Trafficking education video “Chosen”, produced by Shared Hope International, to market.  After conducting customer research, they decided to build their own prevention solution to protect children from being trafficked.  The Traffick Jam brand is currently student-operated on two fronts—the brand team and school team. The school team teaches and empowers youth. Though many university social brands acquire outside funding such as grants or scholarships in order to function, Traffick Jam does not. The brand team manages, markets, and sustains the brand as a business.

This work is interesting to college students because it is a cause in which the millennial generation is concerned. It is a social issue that parents, youth workers, and youth themselves fail to understand.  The exact number of children sex trafficked in the United States is unknown because comprehensive research is lacking (Congressional Research Service 2015).  It is reported by The Schapiro Group (2010), a marketing research firm, that 20,700 men purchase sex in the state of GA each month. 12,400 of these men pay for sex with a young female. These men account for 8,700 paid sex acts with adolescents each month. Traffick Jam has learned from its own survey research with 4,000 students in the schools that one in nine students surveyed know someone who has sold themselves for sex and one in fourteen know someone who has been forced into selling themselves for sex.

Since inception, over 200 marketing students have worked on the brand project and fully funded the work. The brand/marketing team, is essential to Traffick Jam’s sustainability. By breaking up into teams such as communications, events, merchandise, sponsorship, and brand expansion, the brand team is able to operate as one functional marketing team with the shared goal of raising the necessary funds each year and sustaining and growing the brand. Every marketing major is required to take both marketing research and strategic marketing management.  Since both of these courses are required and both courses include client projects, courses projects are collapsed into one project to create efficiencies and synergies between the courses. This approach frees up instruction time and enhances student understanding of the research process in strategic marketing.  It also facilitates more focused and applied instruction because situation analysis, research plans and execution, and marketing strategy plans and execution are practiced in the context of the project, industry, and target markets.

The school team has educated over 4000 high school students in the Middle GA area. 300 students from across the university have taken the three-hour university-wide service learning course. The school team goes through an extensive four-week training program to learn more about DMST, practice the classroom curriculum they present in the high schools, learn the possible signs of a trafficking victim, and connect with real-world law enforcement authorities and trafficking survivors. Once trained, the School Team goes into high schools for six weeks to mentor and educate high-schoolers. High-schoolers are taught to recognize the warning signs of sex- trafficking, unhealthy relationships, how to find sources of strength, and steps to take if they become aware of a trafficking  situation. After implementing the curriculum, Traffick Jam conducts a post-survey.  They have found significant attitudinal changes in the students after going through the program.  Students were significantly more likely to believe that this happens to kids their age, to know what to do, and to think that pimps were wrong and should be stopped. They also believed that their friends thought so too.  Traffick Jam also baselined junior attitudes to compare students who went through Traffick Jam to those who did not. Students who went through the Traffick Jam program as 9th graders reported significant improvements of their knowledge of sex trafficking and their confidence in responding appropriately when faced with the danger.

The project gives Mercer students the opportunity to learn the pains and joys of leading others. They learn that leadership is a tough and sometimes turbulent job that requires a multitude of traits and skills.  Students gain confidence in themselves, learn how to work as a team, make a difference in the lives of others, be a constant learner, and speak in public.  Work-life skills are also introduced and developed such as the ability to develop contingency plans, improvise, work under deadlines, and manage stress.

At the end of the semester, marketing students complete a final reflection paper. Their reflections reveal a great depth of applied marketing knowledge developed through experiential learning, debunking the myopic idea that marketing is merely advertising and sales.  They internalize the complexity of the field including but not limited to the central, complex, and strategic role of branding; the importance of building valuable solutions, access, and communications for each target market; the importance of relationships with partners, team members and customers; and the necessity of quality research in strategic marketing planning.

Due to COVID, this year Traffick Jam could not go into the schools. Therefore, a Traffick Jam innovation service-learning team, called Behind the Barcode, made up of skilled upper classmen in the fields of marketing, communication, education, art/graphic design, and journalism innovated the program and curriculum to reach beyond its boundaries into new markets and are currently testing innovations in online and in-person markets.

The brand has experienced increasing visibility in the Mercer and Macon community, and new partnerships have developed as a result. Bibb Superintendent Curtis Jones and Assistant Superintendent Jamie Cassady have been very strong proponents of the brand and opened up the doors to present to all six high school principals in 2016 and to train all Bibb County counselors, teachers, and staff at the high schools we serve. Campus police, the Bibb Sheriff’s office, and the FBI are partnering with Traffick Jam. In 2017, Traffick Jam hosted a press conference with Mayor Reichert, Jamie Cassady, Tonya Clauson (Chief for Crimes Against Children Unit of Bibb Sheriff’s Office), and Cory Goble (BOE campus police). The Traffick Jam team has presented to the BEP (Business Education Partnership) of Bibb County, the Middle GA Human Trafficking Task Force, and MG-Alert. The marketing team also competed in and won the regional ENACTUS social entrepreneurship competition, and then competed on the national level. Traffick Jam has also been highlighted fifteen times in local media as a trusted source for information on the issue of DMST. Linked here are three of the stories. [How to recognize sex trafficking | Macon Telegraph](https://www.macon.com/news/local/crime/article134063509.html); [Mercer program aimed at spotting, ending human trafficking in Macon | WGXA](https://wgxa.tv/news/local/mercer-program-aimed-at-spotting-ending-human-trafficking-in-macon); [Traffick Jam, law enforcement fight Central Georgia sex trafficking | 13wmaz.com](https://www.13wmaz.com/article/news/traffick-jam-law-enforcement-fight-central-georgia-sex-trafficking/93-8df3401a-c4b6-4165-b510-42fb6ab0741f?fbclid=IwAR0PtDDTpc4hNs5ws5aXyG1_zG9pRqHOuGqrwqnGtAeUYakbFBjkyL-KWZU).

The team’s long-term vision is to build college-age Traffick Jam teams across the country and to continue to grow the brand in such a way that it increasingly impacts the lives, attitudes, and behaviors of teens. The team will be rolling out the expanded curriculum this year that will be made available to schools and youth leaders. Three state universities in GA have shown interest in the courses. Traffick Jam fits perfectly with the Mercer brand and vision. It will enhance Mercer’s reputation as a university who “majors in changing the community.”

Business service-learning projects have the potential to be a state-of-the-art instructional laboratory to teach and apply theory and make a substantial impact on the student, faculty, university, and community. However, it is not for the faint at heart.  This type of course requires much structure and guidance for students and much patience from faculty in pursuit of such a project.  It also demonstrates the capacity of students to create, manage, and sustain a project that makes a critical impact in the lives of others.