Validating Student Microventures: An Evidence-Based Model for Product Positioning and Market Communication

Marjorie Arroyo and Fernando Pacio

Abstract

Student entrepreneurship projects often culminate in attractive brochures or advertisements before learners have established whether a product solves a meaningful problem. This conceptual practice article develops an evidence-driven market-to-message framework from the product concept, business strategy, selling, and advertising lessons in a 68-page entrepreneurship module. The framework connects five decisions that are frequently taught in isolation: customer problem, value proposition, minimum product evidence, selling conversation, and channel-appropriate message. It treats promotion as the final expression of earlier learning rather than as a substitute for market understanding. Drawing on business-model design, customer development, lean experimentation, innovation strategy, and digital marketing literature, the article proposes a traceable claim system in which every promotional statement is linked to observed customer needs or demonstrated product features. It also offers a classroom implementation sequence and an assessment rubric focused on evidence, coherence, ethics, and iteration. The framework is intended for low-resource student microventures and classroom simulations; it does not claim empirical effectiveness. Its central proposition is that credible marketing begins before an advertisement is produced, through disciplined choices about whom to serve, what value to create, what evidence to collect, and what claims can responsibly be made.

Keywords: *product concept; value proposition; student enterprise; customer development; selling; advertising; microventure*

1. Introduction

A polished advertisement can conceal a weak business idea. In student entrepreneurship, learners may choose colors, slogans, music, and social-media formats while the more difficult questions remain unanswered: Who is the customer? What problem is sufficiently important? What alternative does the customer use now? Which feature produces the promised benefit? What evidence supports the claim? When these questions are separated from promotional work, marketing becomes an exercise in decoration rather than a disciplined connection between value creation and value communication, a connection central to sound marketing management (Kotler & Keller, 2016).

The entrepreneurship module examined here provides building blocks for a more coherent approach. Its later lessons address business ideas, strategy, selling, product concepts, innovation, brochures, and advertising (Almerez & Balio, n.d.). The module also asks learners to create concrete outputs, including an action plan, sales presentation, product concept paper, brochure, and commercial. Taken together, these outputs can form a market-learning system. However, their sequence requires an explicit rule: each output must test or communicate a decision made in the previous stage.

This article develops that rule into an evidence-driven framework for student microventures. A microventure is used here to mean a small, low-cost entrepreneurial project or simulation designed primarily for learning. The article's purpose is not to prescribe a universal startup process. It is to help instructors and students maintain coherence from the first product idea to the final market message, particularly when money, time, and access to formal market research are limited.

2. Source Analysis and Conceptual Synthesis

The source module was analyzed as an instructional artifact. Attention was given to four lesson clusters: opportunity and business idea development; strategy; selling skills; and product concept, innovation, and advertising. For each cluster, the analysis identified the decision learners were expected to make, the evidence available to support that decision, and the next output that could use the evidence. The resulting chain was compared with established ideas in business-model design (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2010), customer development (Blank, 2013), lean experimentation (Ries, 2011), innovation strategy (Teece, 2010), and integrated digital marketing (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019).

The analysis is conceptual. No students, customers, or businesses were recruited, and no sales or learning outcomes were measured. Consequently, the framework should be read as a structured design proposition. Its claims concern internal coherence and teachability, not proven causal effects.

3. Why Student Marketing Becomes Disconnected

Three recurring instructional problems explain the disconnect. The first is solution-first thinking. Students select a familiar product and immediately describe its features. Because the product has already been mentally "finished," interviews become attempts to secure approval rather than opportunities to discover a different problem or user. The second is claim inflation. Words such as best, affordable, high quality, innovative, and eco-friendly appear in promotional materials without a comparison standard or supporting evidence. The third is channel imitation. Students copy the style of popular social-media content even when that style does not fit the customer, buying situation, or learning objective.

These problems are not solved by adding more advertising types to a lecture. They are solved by creating traceability. A product feature should respond to a documented need. A benefit claim should follow logically from that feature. A sales question should test whether the benefit matters. A promotional message should use language supported by the test. The selected channel should fit where and how the intended customer seeks information or makes a purchase.

4. The Market-to-Message Framework

The proposed framework consists of five linked decisions. Decision 1 is the customer problem. Students define a narrow customer group and describe the job, difficulty, or desired progress they observed. Evidence can be modest: three to five short conversations, direct observation, existing price information, or an inventory of current alternatives. The standard is transparency, not statistical representativeness.

Decision 2 is the value proposition. Students state how the proposed product helps the customer and why it may be preferable to an existing alternative. The statement should name the benefit, not merely the product category. "A snack box" is a product label; "a pre-ordered snack box that reduces waiting time for students with a short break" is a testable value proposition.

Decision 3 is minimum product evidence. Before designing a campaign, students identify the smallest proof needed for the main promise. A food product may require a taste test, portion and cost calculation, or basic handling check. A crafted item may require a working sample and time-to-produce record. A service may require a script, mock session, or trial delivery. Evidence may disconfirm the idea; that is a learning result, not a failed assignment.

Decision 4 is the selling conversation. Selling is treated as inquiry rather than pressure. A short conversation begins with questions about the customer's current behavior, presents the proposed benefit, checks understanding and objections, and records the outcome. The purpose is to learn which words resonate, which features matter, and what prevents adoption.

Decision 5 is the market message. Only after the earlier decisions are documented do students create a brochure, poster, post, or short commercial. The message identifies the audience, states one primary benefit, provides credible support, offers a clear next action, and avoids claims beyond the available evidence. Creative execution still matters, but creativity serves clarity and relevance.

5. Claim Traceability Matrix

Marketing element	Required basis	Classroom check
Audience	Observed or interviewed customer group	Can the learner describe a specific user and buying situation?
Problem	Documented difficulty, desire, or current workaround	Is the problem stated in customer terms rather than product terms?
Benefit claim	Feature or process that plausibly produces the benefit	Can the learner explain the feature-to-benefit link?
Proof	Prototype result, calculation, demonstration, or qualified testimony	Is the proof proportionate to the claim?
Offer	Price, quantity, access, timing, and conditions	Can a customer understand exactly what is offered?
Call to action	Feasible next step in the chosen channel	Is the requested action clear and low friction?

6. Choosing a Channel by Function

The source module surveys print, direct mail, television, radio, podcast, mobile, social-media, display, outdoor, product-placement, and public-service advertising. For student microventures, memorizing categories is less useful than choosing a channel by function. A channel may be needed to create awareness, explain an unfamiliar product, enable comparison, prompt a trial, support repeat purchase, or restore attention. The communication task should determine the channel, especially because digital and social platforms differ in participation, targeting, content, and measurement dynamics (Dwivedi et al., 2021).

Low-cost choices can be evaluated through four questions. Reach asks whether the intended customer actually encounters the channel. Richness asks whether the channel can demonstrate what the customer needs to understand. Response asks whether the customer can take the desired next action. Responsibility asks whether targeting, data use, testimonials, images, and claims are appropriate. A social-media post may score well on response but poorly on reach if the target customer is not active on the platform. A printed poster may have strong local reach but weak capacity to explain a complex service.

Students should also separate organic visibility from paid promotion and distinguish impressions from meaningful responses. In a classroom project, useful indicators may include inquiries, sample requests, completed trials, repeat orders, or specific objections. Large view counts are not automatically evidence of customer value.

7. Classroom Implementation

The framework can be implemented in six short sprints. Sprint 1 produces a customer-problem card based on observation and interviews. Sprint 2 produces a one-sentence value proposition and an alternatives comparison. Sprint 3 produces a minimum prototype and a record of cost, time, or performance. Sprint 4 conducts structured selling conversations and records questions, objections, and customer language. Sprint 5 creates two message variants for one suitable channel. Sprint 6 compares responses and produces a revision memo.

Each sprint should end with a decision log containing four entries: what we believed, what we did, what we observed, and what we will change. This simple record prevents retrospective storytelling and makes iteration visible. Teams can submit photographs or screenshots as supporting evidence, but assessment should focus on reasoning and traceability rather than production value.

Instructors should impose ethical boundaries. Students must not fabricate testimonials, manipulate scarcity, conceal material conditions, or make health, safety, environmental, or performance claims they cannot substantiate. Personal data collected through interviews or online forms should be minimized and handled according to institutional rules. When students sell actual products, food safety, permits, consumer protection, and school policies may require additional review.

8. Assessment Criteria

A publishable-looking brochure is not sufficient evidence of entrepreneurial learning. Assessment should reward the quality of the chain from problem to message. Five dimensions are proposed: evidence, coherence, feasibility, communication, and ethical judgment. Evidence concerns the relevance and transparency of observations, interviews, tests, and calculations. Coherence concerns whether the product, benefit, proof, offer, and channel fit one another. Feasibility concerns whether the team can deliver the offer with available resources. Communication concerns clarity, audience fit, and a workable call to action. Ethical judgment concerns truthful claims, fair representation, responsible data use, and attention to safety.

Revision should be explicit in the rubric. A team that changes its message or product after receiving contrary evidence demonstrates learning. Conversely, a visually polished submission that ignores contrary evidence should not receive the highest rating. This shifts classroom culture from defending the first idea to improving the quality of the decision.

9. Discussion

The framework changes the role of advertising in entrepreneurship education. Advertising is no longer an isolated final performance; it becomes a compressed statement of earlier market learning. This arrangement also clarifies the role of innovation. Innovation is not novelty for its own sake. In a microventure, it may consist of a better combination of convenience, price, timing, packaging, access, reliability, or experience for a defined user. The relevant question is whether the difference creates value and can be delivered.

The approach is deliberately compatible with constrained settings. It does not require a large survey, sophisticated analytics, or a fully launched enterprise. Its discipline comes from explicit assumptions, small tests, and documented decisions. At the same time, the framework avoids romanticizing minimal experimentation. A few interviews cannot establish market size, and a classroom taste test cannot prove long-term demand. Students should learn to state the boundary of their evidence.

10. Limitations and Future Research

This framework was developed from document analysis and conceptual synthesis. It requires classroom testing across different products, disciplines, and resource conditions. The five decisions may also unfold iteratively rather than in a clean sequence. For example, a sales conversation may reveal a new customer group and require the team to revisit the original problem.

Future studies could compare conventional advertisement-first projects with the traceability approach. Outcome measures might include the specificity of customer definitions, proportion of supported claims, quality of revisions, alignment between channel and customer behavior, and learner ability to distinguish evidence from assumption. Longitudinal work could examine whether students retain these habits in later ventures or professional projects.

11. Conclusion

Credible promotion begins before a slogan is written. It begins when learners identify a real customer situation, formulate a value proposition, produce modest evidence, listen during a selling conversation, and limit claims to what the evidence can support. By linking the module's product, strategy, selling, and advertising lessons, the market-to-message framework turns separate assignments into a disciplined learning process. The result is not only a better advertisement; it is a more responsible way of deciding what to offer, to whom, and why.

Declarations

Funding: No external funding was reported for the preparation of this conceptual article. Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest. Data availability: No empirical dataset was created or analyzed; the source material was the instructional module supplied for adaptation. Ethical review: Not applicable because the article reports no research involving human participants.

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