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Spicing it Up: A Teacher's Testimony of Cinnamon Case Studies and Role Plays in LEA Master 1 English Class

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Résumé

Étant tombée par hasard, dans son sac, sur une boîte de bonbons Ice Breakers à la cannelle, et après l'avoir partagée avec sa classe, une enseignante a développé un programme d'un semestre entier autour du thème de la cannelle. Afin de donner des exercices concrets liés à la gestion de projet et au développement des affaires internationales, une société hypothétique d'import-export de cannelle, Spice Girls & Co., est utilisée comme cadre pour développer du marketing numérique pour des réseaux sociaux, des plans d'exportation avec des outils de gestion de projet et des exercices de négociation. Bien que tous les étudiants n'apprécient pas eux-mêmes le goût de la cannelle, ils abordent les études de cas et les jeux de rôle avec un certain enthousiasme, étant donné le rôle important que jouent la cannelle et le *pumpkin spice* dans la culture de consommation américaine et son marketing saisonnier. Ce témoignage pédagogique montre comment un programme axé sur un produit est utilisé pour amener les étudiants à exécuter des tâches de développement commercial spécifiques de manière réaliste et professionnelle.

Mots clés : cannelle, pumpkin spice, gestion de projet, marketing saisonnier, marketing numérique sur réseaux sociaux

Abstract

Stumbling across a box of cinnamon Ice Breakers mints in her bag, and after having shared them with her class, a teacher was inspired to develop an entire semester's program around the theme of cinnamon. In order to give concrete exercises relating to project management and international business development, a hypothetical cinnamon import-export company, Spice Girls & Co., is used as a framework for executing social media marketing, export plans with project management tools, and negotiation exercises. Although not all students enjoy the taste of cinnamon themselves, they approach the case studies and role plays with a certain enthusiasm, given the important role cinnamon and pumpkin spice products play in American consumer culture and seasonal marketing. This teaching testimony highlights how a product-focused program is used to inspire students to execute specific business development tasks in a realistic and professional way.

Key Words: cinnamon, pumpkin spice, project management, seasonal marketing, social media marketing

Students need a concrete way to study abstract theories and apply management strategies learned in class. While the Masters 1 LEA International Business Development English classes cover basics regarding import-export, external and international risks, social media marketing, and negotiations, we have "spiced things up" by putting cinnamon at the heart of our case studies and role plays. If the choice to use cinnamon as the theme for our class was almost by accident after tasting American cinnamon candies in a first class as an ice-breaker, it has proven to be an efficient and successful theme to help Masters 1 students prepare for their future internships and jobs.

The Commercial Power of Cinnamon in American Consumer Culture and Marketing

Even if it is a popular spice in Central Europe and Africa, cinnamon has a particular link to American culture; indeed, it is a spice that is used in many traditional dishes such as apple pie and cranberry sauce. But more specifically, many American candies associate cinnamon with a “hot” or burning sensation on the tongue, creating a second culinary experience.¹ These confections include Red Hots, Hot Tamales, Fire Picks, Wrigley’s Big Red Chewing Gum, and Atomic Fireballs. As their names indicate by using “Red,” “Hot,” or “Fire,” these sweets can burn your tongue or mouth as they are very strong. Usually, this stout burning sensation is not popular amongst French students, unless they are already familiar with the products from a trip to the United States.

While many of these candies are classics, cinnamon continues to show up in ephemeral or seasonal products. Cinnamon Coke, an attempt at holiday product diversification, came out in stores for Christmas 2019.² And, although cinnamon Tic Tacs have been around for decades, for the Holiday Season 2021, the brand brought out “Naughty,” “Sinfully Cinnamon” packaging that included cinnamon sticks in the visual design as part of the “Naught vs. Nice” Christmas theme.³ Cinnamon remains a trend in both American product diversification and marketing strategies.

But there is another spice that reinforces cinnamon’s predominant place in American food and drink culture: pumpkin spice. This combination of cinnamon, nutmeg, ginger, and cloves is used to make the traditional pumpkin pie for Thanksgiving or Christmas. It is not pure cinnamon, but cinnamon represents the largest proportion of the mixture. In 2003, the coffee chain Starbucks transposed the spice mixture from holiday pies to coffee drinks, and they developed, in according with their seasonal approach to products and marketing, the Pumpkin Spice Latté (PSL), one of their most famous signature drinks to date. This cinnamon derivative beverage has been the source of many controversies ranging from its release date each year (sometimes as early as August) to the fact it did not contain any actual pumpkin until 2015.⁴ The PSL trend is so popular with American consumers that the flavor can now be found in anything from candles to breakfast cereal to beer, such as Nitro Pumpkin Spice Latte Stout (2016).⁵ The American taste for PSL is both gustative but also sentimental. Although we find cinnamon in carrot cake, a traditional spring recipe often consumed at Easter, undeniably, the spice is associated with the fall and winter seasons and all of the celebrations taking place during the months from October through December, such as Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas.

¹ QCDEV, “Spicy Candy Now a Hot Commodity in US”, Quality Candy Company, <https://qcandy.com/>, October 8, 2018.

<https://qcandy.com/spicy-candy-now-a-hot-commodity-in-us/>

² Michelle GANT, “Cinnamon Coke is coming to a store near you – but is it any good?”, *Today*, today.com, Aug 14, 2019.

<https://www.today.com/food/cinnamon-coke-coming-store-near-you-it-any-good-t160744>

³ Jaclyn GUILIANO, “Press Release: Ferrero Unveils Seasonal Items to Celebrate the Holidays”, *PR Newswire*, apnews.com, November 23, 2021.

https://apnews.com/press-release/pr-newswire/lifestyle-holidays_fc5b0eba5141a4fde28f641533057800

⁴ Nina FRIEND, “The Surprising History of Pumpkin Spice”, *Food and Wine*, foodandwine.com, August 24, 2021.

<https://www.foodandwine.com/lifestyle/pumpkin-spice-history>

⁵ Breckenridge Brewery, “Press Release: Breckenridge Brewery Releases First Nitro Series Seasonal: Nitro Pumpkin Spice Latte Stout”, *Globalnewswire*, globenewswire.com, September 06, 2016.

<https://www.globenewswire.com/en/news-release/2016/09/06/1114963/0/en/Breckenridge-Brewery-Releases-First-Nitro-Series-Seasonal-Nitro-Pumpkin-Spice-Latte-Stout.html>

These holidays represent top consumer spending in the United States economy,⁶ and cinnamon is right there in the middle of the marketing mix to incite spending on drinks, candies, foods, and home accessories.

To introduce students to this profitable and cultural spice, our course usually both opens and closes with a taste test. We begin by trying a type of cinnamon candy in the first class. The experiment reveals that not everyone in the class likes cinnamon, and such a divergence in taste is a great point of debate. This fun approach to discovering an unknown product sets the tone for the exercises to come, and also inspires students to think about how they would market such products to a French clientele. We end the semester with a cinnamon roll tea break that coincides with the Thanksgiving and Christmas periods. During the second semester, our students are abroad for exchange programs and internships. Many of them will comment on how they encounter cinnamon products during this period abroad. The Master 2 cohort is usually treated to a tasting of Jack Daniel's Fire during the integration seminar. Over a twelve-month period, cinnamon is the topic of our exercises, exams, conversations, and activities. This focus on a specific product models for students the entire process of product research and engagement. While cinnamon is an easy and fun product with which to work, it is also a way to open the discussion and to prepare students to commercialize products that are not necessarily attractive (fire proof doors, for example) or ones for which they do not have a personal affinity.

A Vital Resource: The CBI Fact Sheet

Cinnamon has proven to be an effective product choice for enabling students to work on their skills in project management, business development, and external risk management. Laying the ground work so they can go forward in their exercises has been accomplished by a first exercise regarding the importing of cinnamon into Europe. The Centre for the Promotion of Imports from developing countries (CBI) has elaborated a useful and efficient factsheet addressing the European rules regarding the importation of cinnamon into the EU.⁷ The document covers numerous topics including product description, production specification, buyer requirements, trade and macroeconomic statistics, market trends, price, and useful resources. While the majority of the class is spent on producing marketing and management documents in English, we still do some comprehension exercises, and this 18-page document is perfect for helping students to work their comprehension skills at the Master's level. A questionnaire helps them navigate the document to understand the two types of cinnamon, how cinnamon must be transported, treated, and tested, and how importers should demonstrate transparency in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) reporting with reference to document ISO 26000 of the International Organization for Standardization.⁸

Furthermore, the factsheet gives students an idea of the type of market and product research they will need to do in their internships and in their future jobs. This particular document refers to reglementary organizations such as the European Spice Association (ESA) which has published a Quality Minima Document and also the general European law website (EUR-Lex) to consult regarding required controls of certain imported products.⁹ The report equally contains

⁶ Mike BROWN, "Cost of thanksgiving in 2019", *Lendelu*, Lendulu.com, June 24, 2020.

<https://lendedu.com/blog/cost-of-thanksgiving/>; Katie Jordan, "2018 Halloween shopping behavior", *National Retail Federation*, nrf.com, September 27, 2018. <https://nrf.com/blog/2018-halloween-shopping-behavior>

⁷ CBI, "Exporting cinnamon to Europe", CBI, cbi.edu, 13 September 2018.

<https://www.cbi.eu/market-information/spices-herbs/cinnamon>

⁸ <https://www.iso.org/iso-26000-social-responsibility.html>

⁹ <https://www.esa-spices.org/>; <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/homepage.html>

references to European food safety management systems such as BRC, IFS, FSSC2200 and SQF. In other words, this one resource teaches students the basics about cinnamon but also gives an overview of the policies in the sector. The example of cinnamon is therefore transferable to any product on which they will work in their future positions as importers or business developers.

Spice Girls & Co.: Role Plays, Case Studies, and Negotiations

Once cinnamon processes are covered, the class proceeds to work based on a hypothetical spice import-export company in Paris. Spice Girls & Co. is imagined to be a smaller company looking to augment the French market for cinnamon consumption through event planning and social media posts that educate and inspire customers to buy more cinnamon.

Social Media Posts

We work on social media marketing in class as this is one skill the current generation of students has to offer when they are seeking shorter, 8-week internships within small and small-to-medium-sized companies. After reviewing communication strategies, language, and hashtagging, students produce a post regarding the two types of cinnamon: “You are Roger or Regina Smith, and you are the marketing manager at Spice Girls & Co, based in Paris. You are concerned customers don’t understand the difference between the two types of cinnamon. Prepare a short social media post to educate them.” This exercise helps students to understand the differences between the two types of cinnamon themselves, so that they can therefore negotiate prices according to quality and develop marketing strategies based on consumers’ needs.

Taking the social media post one step further, we launched a Cinnamon Pet Challenge to see how students could use their creativity and also give pertinent facts about cinnamon, such as its health benefits:

As we all know, “cats own the internet.” Especially during the COVID period, many coworkers got to know each other’s pets via ZOOM. Some businesses even chose to have their employees’ pets take part in their marketing campaigns.

Continuing on this trend, Spice Girls & Co. has decided to invite its employees to submit an advertisement idea using a photo of their pet.

You should:

- 1) Take a picture of your pet (or borrow a photo from a friend, relative, the internet & cite the source, or use a drawing or stuffed animal).*
- 2) Think of a catchy text to go along with the pet’s photo. You might want to make a cinnamon joke or give some factual information about cinnamon (regarding the two types, health benefits, etc.)*
- 3) Make a meme or a montage of the two.*
- 4) Load your image to e-campus in the “Pet Cinnamon Promotion” by Tuesday, October 5.*

Again, this exercise reinforced general knowledge of cinnamon and encouraged students to be creative. In addition to the pedagogical nature of the work, thanks to this exercise, we learned

that pets in our class ranged from a guinea pig to horses, a pigeon, and of course, dogs and cats. In the end, it was also a team-building exercise.

Export Plan/Business Expo Event Planning

As all three of the LEA Masters programs at the Université de Caen share a focus on project management, we move on to preparing an export plan that includes setting up a bespoke stand at WorldFood Warsaw to export Welsh lamb to Poland.¹⁰ The export plan includes a PESTLE analysis, a simulated budget, a GANTT chart, and a brainstorming list of goodies and activities for the stand. After students have worked some on the Welsh lamb aspect, they receive a memo from the direction at Hybu Cig Cymru/Meat Promotion Wales team that they are to undertake a **piggyback marketing promotion** with Spice Girls & Co., thus cinnamon finds its way into the exercise, and students are faced with managing two teams and their two products instead of one. As piggybacking is an important strategy for foreign business development, this twist in the assignment is realistic.

Negotiations

The last weeks of our course are dedicated to win-win negotiation strategies as presented by British Council worksheets.¹¹ Political and global contexts of the last years have certainly created numerous realistic situations for negotiation role plays, including the Yellow Vest Movement, the COVID-19 Pandemic, and now the war in Ukraine. Students work with a partner to train for the final oral exam, and the concluding class exercises are mostly based on Thanksgiving situations—either a rise in the price of cranberries, who will do the dishes after the big meal, or getting turkey prices down for the local soup kitchen. The final exam returns to situations within the context of Spice Girls & Co., and the topics can be broken down into the main themes of negotiating prices or working conditions. Having worked on cinnamon throughout the semester, and having role played Spice Girls & Co. in both written and oral exercises, the students are ready to take up any of the following topics:

1) Chain Store Consortium Customer vs. Cinnamon Supplier

As a franchised chain, most CXXXXX Cafés purchase their supplies in bulk from their parent company. However, due to the recent global pandemic, the distribution chain has broken down. The CXXXXX Café Paris Consortium would like to contract with a new cinnamon supplier, uniquely to purchase cinnamon powder. They aren't really clear on the difference between Cassia and Ceylon cinnamon, but introducing new beverages and highlighting healthy drinks are part of their 2022 strategic plan. Reg(ina) from Spice Girls & Co has been invited to negotiate a supplier contract with them. To which commitments will each side agree?

2) Jute bag supplier vs. Individual Import/Export Client

It is important to Reg and Regina of Spice Girls & Co that they are constantly complying with EU import/export laws. They are aware that the cinnamon they import, repackage, and distribute must be supplied in certain types of packages. For example, according to the CBI product fact sheet, "Whole cinnamon must be packed in new, clean, sound and dry bags of jute, cloth laminated with polyethylene or polypropylene or high-density polyethylene

¹⁰ This exercise regarding exporting Welsh Lamb to Poland through the WorldFood Warsaw Exhibit was originally created by Carys LEWIS, Université de Bretagne Occidentale.

¹¹ <https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/negotiations-1-building-relationships>

bags/pouches.” The SG&Co. marketing team has also noticed that customers respond really well to cinnamon sticks packed in jute bags—they like the bags and keep them to use for other products. Also, the marketing team has decided that SG&Co. should go beyond their current sustainable development practice of using paper shopping bags for their customers’ purchases and move forward with larger jute shopping bags for in-store purchases. For these reasons, Reg(ina) is meeting with Claude Lavigne of Jute “R” Us to negotiate a supplier contract for both small cinnamon stick bags and larger shopping bags. To what terms will each side agree?

3) Management vs. Workers

While in general, Spice Girls & Co is a great, fun place to work, there has been some recent tension between the Administrative Staff and the Management. Based in Paris, SG&Co. pays the Administrative Staff minimum wage (10.03€/hr), with an annual bonus of a spice basket and a 20% standing discount. With the forthcoming economic crisis due to COVID-19, the Admin employees are tired of scraping by on minimum wage. They want to earn a higher hourly pay. The Managers have been earning a comfortable profit, but feel they cannot increase pay without serious consequences. However, the management team is really motivated to find a solution as they want to keep their current employees (10 at the moment) and have a good working environment. They are thinking about how they can propose some added perks that would be less expensive than an actual wage increase. What solutions will the two sides agree upon?

Cinnamon prices per type and category, prices of jute bags and the number to be ordered, delivery times, and adjusting working conditions are just some of the variables for which the students have trained. Students have also been exercising their creativity to find win-win solutions that require thinking out of the box. Many Masters 1 students go on to actually undertake negotiations in their semester 2 internships, and then they negotiate daily as business developers.

Student Productions

This testimony of classroom experience will now finish on some examples of students’ work to demonstrate how cinnamon inspired them to be creative, prepare professional work, and navigate between levels of language. For this class, students work in groups of 5 or 6, and most assignments are carried out by the groups, or by pairs. One exercise was individual, the cinnamon pet challenge.

As mentioned earlier, students were asked to prepare a meme for social media that contained relevant information about cinnamon. Many students used apps on their phones or the standard software to which they have access on their laptop computers to make the designs. For the first social media exercise, students were to focus on the differences between the two types of cinnamon. The Tiger group¹² chose to use a photo of the two types of cinnamon, asking a question, and hashtagging the two types of cinnamon (Figure 1). Within 48 hours, and despite the groups’ description of their account as one for case studies, the Tigers were contacted by Canelaté,¹³ a Ceylon Cinnamon consortium representing small farms in Sri Lanka to negotiate

¹² Members of the Tiger group (2021-2022) were Clémentine Gervaise, Emilie Haquet, Mélanie Himen, Mathilde Lozach, Dagmar Tomášková, and Telmen Tsogtbaatar.

¹³ https://www.instagram.com/canelate_ceyloncinnamon/. The account (as well as the website) appear to be inactive at the moment.

an import contract. The students were pleasantly surprised at the fast success of their social media post, and the whole class was able to appreciate the effectiveness of their work.

With regards to the Cinnamon Pet Challenge, our Erasmus student, Dagmar Tomášková, seized upon a play of words to remind followers that cinnamon actually comes from the bark of the tree (Figure 2). Adelaïde Coutant chose to focus on how cinnamon can make your life better with her meme “Cinnamon brings colour to your life,” in which we see a cat transform from white to tabby thanks to cinnamon (Figure 3). Finally, Pauline Bailleul also used a cat image to emphasize the healthy, anti-inflammatory property of cinnamon (Figure 4). Each of the social media posts combines the cuteness of the pet with a technical message about the cinnamon product. Dagmar’s example, in particular, demonstrates how a non-native student succeeds in making word-play. Navigating from one level of language to another is a common task in creating social media posts or special messages to clients. The group EVERGLOW¹⁴ succeeded in working Halloween vocabulary and word play into their invitation to loyal customers for a Halloween party (Figure 5). Using phrases like “as you witch” and “please don’t ghost us” is not only humorous but also a good demonstration of the team’s capacity for catchy marketing phrases.

An Export Plan with Sensory Experiences

One step of the export plan assignment was to brainstorm ideas for activities and goodies for the bespoke stand shared between Spice Girls & Co. and Hybu Cig Cymru/Meat Promotion Wales. Team Tiger made a color-coded brainstorming mind map, and in addition to being visually clear, the team came up with some extraordinary ideas (Figure 6). Their export plan included several games in which exhibit participants could win prizes. Perhaps the most original idea was in their “sensory experience” category—diffuse the smell of cinnamon at the stand to draw visitors to them, in addition to tasting cinnamon rolls and a Welsh stew with cinnamon in it. This same group also included children’s activities at their stand, and with the cinnamon air freshener, these were the two most original ideas of the class. It was important for all the groups to see how much planning, time, and work would go into the preparation of such a stand in a neighboring European country, and how the marketing of cinnamon could be translated into concrete, physical experiences.

Conclusion

After several years of teaching project management, digital marketing, external risk management, and negotiations through the product of cinnamon, it is likely that the course will continue in this way. Some issues related to the skills or the product of cinnamon may be evolving—notably Corporate Social Responsibility. European consumers in particular are very keen on traceability and sustainable development, so we will need to pay increasing attention to this point in the coming years. Also, we cannot predict how long the PSL trend will last, even though it is now available in an iced version. With global access to American products, Red Hots or Hot Tamales may no longer be viewed as exotic in five years or so. However, one thing is sure: having identified the product of cinnamon as being pertinent for professional training yet also fun for pedagogical activities has helped to create a positive learning environment in the LEA Masters 1 International Business Development Class.

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Legends for Figures

Figure 1:
Tiger group's Instagram post on the two types of cinnamon.



Figure 2:
Erasmus student Dagmar Tomáškov created a cinnamon pet meme reminding followers that cinnamon actually comes from the bark of the tree.



Figure 3:
“Cinnamon brings colour to your life.” Adelaïde Coutant’s pet meme shows the before and after when you add cinnamon to your life.



Figure 4:
Cinnamon has health benefits, like anti-inflammatory properties, as demonstrated here by Pauline Bailleul.

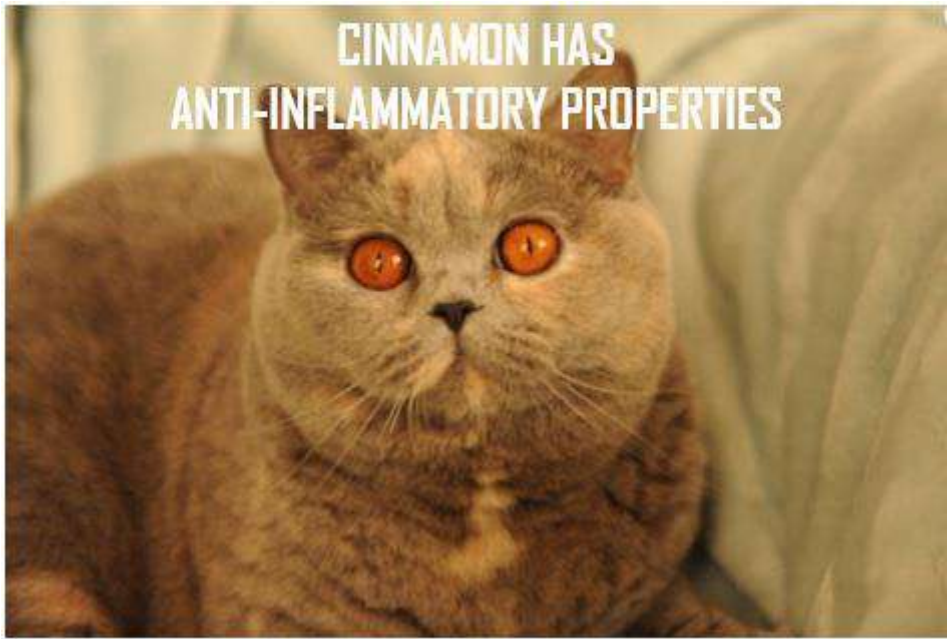


Figure 5:
Extract from Spice Girls & Co. Halloween party, as imagined by the team EVERGLOW.

Feel free to bring some treats... it is as you witch!
 The party will take place on October 31rst from 7 PM to 10 PM, the party will take place in the hostel de la dame Jouanne, commandery forest, 77760 Larchant . Please don't ghost us.
 We look forward to seeing you all in your scary costumes.

Figure 6:
Tiger group's brainstorming mind map demonstrating their "sensory experience" ideas.

