

Preface

WIDE SCALE MARKETING FOR DISTANCE AND ONLINE LEARNING

Distance and online learning (DOL), especially in the developing countries, has been at the forefront of education and training in respect of access and equity, reforms in pedagogy, organization and management, and ICT applications and automation of educational practices. However, in reality, DOL (particularly the traditional distance education delivery) has been pitted against the classroom/campus based teaching-learning delivery for long.

This therefore calls for the DOL to adopt aggressive promotional strategies. What an objective promotional system needs to do is, on one hand, to dispel this uneven competition and put up the strategic role of DOL in providing access and equity in education and training, but also on the other hand to strive towards convergence of systems/technologies/strategies/methods/procedures, and promote blended learning.

Not many DOL institutions conduct SWOT analysis based on their vision and mission. While SWOT, which includes promotional and marketing strategies, will initially contribute to institutional growth, it requires for any promotional systems to significantly contribute to long-term and sustainable institutional growth to adopt a holistic planning initiative (Haughey, 2003; Panda, 2009).

Wide scale marketing for DOL is expected to provide lifelong learners a wide basket of choices in respect of what to study, when to study, and with what delivery combinations. In comparison to the established conventional system of education and training, DOL has long been at a disadvantage due partly to institutional bipartisan approach itself (especially in the dual-mode institutions) and partly to lack of awareness among and promotional strategies and skills by the DOL practitioners.

Marketing to a greater extent has been the stronghold of the conventional campus-based education/training/extension. It requires concerted efforts to extend this to DOL and devise differentially appropriate strategies and mechanisms to bring DOL at par, as also to make it reach an array of stakeholders.

While a combination of strategies towards marketing and promotion is essential, the whole paradigm is based on quality assurance, and, therefore, the pedagogic dimensions of DOL shall largely determine the success of any marketing/promotion strategy.

Social technologies and social networks provide immense opportunities and platforms to promote/market any genuinely quality programme—whether campus based, distance learning, online, or blended. In a networked community of practitioners, what is crucial is a strict peer review of what is being promoted.

It has been argued that relationship marketing (RM) (Shaik, 2005; Helgesen, 2008) is of great significance to distance and online education. This can be addressed from the point of view of development of sustainable strategies towards creation of need based student values. Since DOL is concerned heavily

with lifelong learning, it is imperative that graduate loyalty is maintained towards continuing education/ professional development and lifelong learning.

Conceptual frameworks and research modeling need to be developed to address this issue in a continuum ranging from promotion and recruitment, through successful completion, to relationship marketing. Marketing here though should not be viewed from the perspective of any market, rather from the viewpoint of lifelong learning. Such relationship management may extend to include a host of target audiences beyond the students (Yilmaz, 2005), and involve a host of technological applications/ outlets.

It is of crucial importance, if DOL is based on learner-centric models, that student satisfaction surveys are undertaken continuously, the results are put in the institutional public domain, and that the survey results are formatively built into institutional decision-making.

A part of student satisfaction and relationship management is survey of job market and the first destination of graduates. This kind of marketing research provides valuable information on reorienting the curricular programmes, courses and knowledge-skill strategies to suit both the graduates and the employers. However, an extension of such a strategy may include marketing and promotion of non-market oriented educational programmes and resources which are crucial to community, socio-economic, and national development.

In most countries, resources deployed for education and training are generally limited (or less) compared to other sectors of national investment. In most of the instances, distance education is allocated less, and the distance teaching institutions are required to generate most of their resources on their own. Economy of scale and unit cost therefore assume greater significance to DOL (Rumble, 1997; Bramble & Panda, 2008).

Marketing of distance education shall not only contribute to economy of scale but also attract additional resources through outsourcing, research grants, endowments, philanthropic donations, collaboration and networking. Mega universities (Daniel, 1996) and mega schools (Daniel, 2010) today need to work hard constantly and consciously to address this issue vis-à-vis technology and quality.

It is imperative that a comprehensive status analysis of the strategies and results of marketing in DOL is undertaken internationally so as to inform decision-makers/leaders, teachers and programme developers, online facilitators, and a host of allied practitioners and stakeholders in revisiting what is prescribed as good. This encompasses a wide range of DOL practices—courses and programmes, technologies, procedures, benchmarks, and best practices for graduates and alumni, teachers, and allied functionaries. The present volume is a welcome addition to this initiative.

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