

Afterword

INTRODUCTION

Marketing and distance education are evolving sciences and will continue to be so in the near future and beyond as technologies change and worldwide economies demand new knowledge development and skill training.

This collection of papers has been created to advance both current marketing and distance learning theories and applications into our expected changing future. While the future of both marketing and distance education can be difficult to predict, the papers provide excellent guidance and preparation for marketing practitioners and academic leaders. The papers address three critical areas:

- the underpinning of traditional and strategic marketing to the distance learning environment;
- the uses and advancement of marketing technologies to the distance learning environment; and
- the advancements made in distance learning pedagogy and their marketability to otherwise unreceptive audiences.

As many of the authors have noted, there are many challenges and opportunities to marketing distance education programs. Many are deeply rooted in the advancements of marketing strategies and tactics, as well as with new developments in distance learning and marketing technologies, but others are also a result of historical challenges, flaws or opportunities within academia.

As Kocak noted in her paper, there are marketing considerations that can simply be communicated around marketing's 4P's and 4C's; however, within the academic environment, there are many more considerations to address including the marketing organization, the gap between marketing practitioners and academic leadership, marketing and conversion processes and customer relationship management, and an appreciation for not only the tactics of marketing, but also the strategic marketing planning and positioning process. As Kocak has stated well, marketers need to understand these 4 P's of product, place, promotion and price and 4 C's of customer needs, convenience, communication and cost, but they must also address the basics of marketing, state-of-the art marketing technology developments, complexity and bureaucracy of the marketing process within higher education and the staffing challenges, abilities and opportunities of academic marketing departments. Mastering these internal factors must first be addressed if an institution is to effectively migrate and capitalize on the external opportunities of marketing distance education, as Sabuncuoglu and Gokaliler have identified in their paper.

For distance education marketers leveraging the newer technology marketing tools identified by Stoltenkamp, Mapuva, Shaik, Ritter and others, marketers need to firmly identify their strategy and position

in the marketplace. They need to assess the needs of the marketplace and clearly define the markets they serve (Tokay & Argan). Otherwise, the temptation exists to exhaust significant resources on marketing that are both tactical and non-measurable, but what some might consider as trendy.

All too often distance education marketers are asked to leverage new technologies in their marketing without examining them from a strategic or financial perspective. As Simpson illustrates, the institution needs to be scientific in its financial decisions and the marketing function or department needs to be a strategic element and not one that reacts to every new development.

INTERNAL MARKETING CHALLENGES

For distance learning institutions to market effectively, they need to add another “P” to the traditional 4 P’s of marketing. This “P” is people. Marketing organizations often overlook this factor or take it for granted that their people are ready for distance education marketing. However, with marketing being a science and with technology so rapidly changing, marketing practitioners need to keep pace. They also need to be the voice of the customer to academic leadership as well as serve as a marketing evangelist to the organization, as a gap often exists between marketing practitioners and academic leadership (Fong, 2009).

My observations with marketing departments show that despite all the good intentions of this collection of papers, optimal marketing effectiveness is often impeded by sub-par marketing operations or the lack of a vision for the strategic importance of marketing staff development. While there are many high performing marketing departments promoting distance education, such as those at the University of Phoenix, Penn State World Campus, Capella University, the University of Minnesota and Rio Salado College to name a few, there are many in transformation where older, traditional marketing skills need to be upgraded in strategic and e-marketing areas. Many marketing departments suffer from a legacy of experiences in print and broadcast media and lack the knowledge and ability to perform e-marketing basics adequately, let alone develop a focused and disciplined strategic marketing plan.

Another possible hindrance in adopting more distance education marketing efforts is inadequate attention to sufficient budgeting. While Simpson addresses this in his paper, many institutions lack the experience or do not have supportive cultures to properly establish correct or industry-average marketing budgets. The University Continuing and Professional Education Association (UPCEA) recommends approximately 10% of gross revenues be applied to marketing functions. Of this, about half would be operational marketing costs while the other half would be for media costs, including electronic marketing. While a review of some for-profit institutions often shows some marketing ratios between 24% (Apollo Group, 3rd Q of 2010) and 30% (Capella 10-K, 2009), many traditional colleges and universities offering distance education programs often fail to reach half of the UPCEA recommended levels.

A potential future focus for this publication would be to include the “people” and marketing budget elements and how these foundations are essential to effectively market distance education programs.

STRATEGIC MARKETING FOUNDATION

Often marketing practitioners are quick to react to new e-marketing technologies by either trial spending or investing significant labor resources into the new media without analyzing how the new media fits

into the marketing strategy or how the target market relates through the new media. In addition, new marketing media are often difficult to track and measure return on investment.

While advertising on social media sites such as Facebook and LinkedIn allows for tracking click-through rates and other data, the linkages to CRM and enrollment management systems are often lacking and thus deter marketing managers from tracking true ROI.

As Ispir points out in his paper on advertising avoidance, marketing practitioners first need to also ensure that their current and proven marketing efforts are performing as planned prior to adopting unproven new media. For example, a recent examination of 105 continuing and distance education websites (Fong, 2010) revealed that most institutions lack the basics of search engine optimization, including poorly written meta-titles, meta-descriptions and meta-keywords; have ineffective copy and keywords on their websites; and lack a sufficient number of links coming into their sites, all of which are critical for search engines such as Google, Bing and Yahoo to correctly index.

To effectively market distance education, institutions need to balance proven methods while experimenting with new methods. This balance needs to occur in the context of a strategic marketing plan and the prioritization of resources.

INFORMATION: CUSTOMER AND COMPETITOR IDENTIFICATION

Given the many opportunities provided to distance education marketers through advancements in marketing and technology, practitioners and academic leaders are often faced with critical decisions. In fact, as practitioners and leaders plan annually and on-going for their marketing initiatives, much will have changed from the previous year. New competitors will enter the market place (Gok & Özeren). Students and corporate partners will demand new curriculum topics and ways to learn. Marketing will also change, just as it did from the 1970's and 1980's from mass media to target marketing of the 1990's to the electronic and customer relationship marketing of 2000 and beyond.

However, for successful strategic planning and managing and leveraging one's brand effectively (Sabuncuoglu & Gokaliler) and optimizing financial resources and staffing (Simpson), an effective means for educating the organization around the marketplace and customer is needed.

Practitioners and leaders need effective data and information to make successful strategic marketing decisions. They need to 1) master their own customer and prospect information through effective customer relationship management (CRM) systems and processes, 2) have environmental and competitive scanning processes in place and 3) be able to conduct market research on customer and industry needs and satisfaction (Tokay & Argan, Stollefson).

CRM processes built on a marketing strategy can and should be valuable sources of information for an institution. An institution should first master its own customer and prospect information and then build upon that by understanding the marketplace and competition. As noted in some of the papers (Tokay & Argan, Gok & Özeren, Shaik & Ritter), efficiency in converting the prospect into a student is also critical, as it is based on using information in the conversion process. A secret shopping study of 60 institutions in the U.S. (Fong, 2010) showed that many institutions are overlooking these opportunities.

Clearly, a distance education institution would rather have an effective strategy that has a clearly defined marketing position, target market and competitive and industry understanding coupled with an adequate marketing campaign rather than a beautiful campaign that is targeted incorrectly. Obviously, the goal is to have both: an effective strategy and a brilliant and creative marketing execution. However, if a

priority is to be set, a sound strategy should guide all other elements, actions and initiatives. This strategic marketing initiative does need the support of effective CRM processes to maximize student conversion.

USE OF TECHNOLOGY

Assuming that the marketing staffing, strategy and CRM infrastructure are in place, the use of marketing technologies is more appropriate to either reach new audiences who would not have otherwise responded or to improve the effectiveness of the message. Many of the papers in the publication leverage new technologies, such as wikis, blogs, social media and search engines among others. All of these tools have a place, but must be placed in the context of the market, strategy, competition and message.

Many of the papers identify the use of social media (Shaik & Ritter; Yamamoto; Hamburg, Terstreip & Engert), such as Facebook, SecondLife and MySpace. As Shaik and Ritter state, the appropriate use of social media results in an impact on the enrollment or conversion funnel or process. Many marketing practitioners correctly identify a business or enrollment objective and as a result couple a social media tool to enhance the prospect or applicant's experience to ultimately become a student. They use social networking tools such as Facebook or creating a blog to address a specific informational need of a prospective student, such as whether the institution is credible or whether a student can learn effectively and become employed as a result of earning a degree online from the institution. Social networking tools, such as an effective Facebook fan page, can address a prospect's question in an objective manner, not just by an institution's staff responding to the question, but from other students and graduates.

In this manner, institutions have used Facebook as a conversion and an advising tool that is often illustrated as in the middle or end of the enrollment funnel or pipeline. Some institutions have used social media such as Facebook in a way to generate new leads or prospects, but few in the distance learning arena have been successful in this early pipeline approach.

With technology, institutions need to make sure that they are not too far ahead of the customer's needs. While having new technology can vault an institution into a competitive position, it can also drain a university of its resources, as was illustrated by Simpson regarding early NYU and Cardean initiatives. As stated earlier, an institution should be monitoring market and industry developments to determine whether global economic or domestic demographic shifts warrant the use of technologies not only for effective e-learning, but also for marketing purposes.

As Yamamoto has identified in her paper, M-Learning is a quickly evolving modality for learning. As can be seen by the early success of institutions in M-Learning such as Villanova University and Walden University, careful and strategic consideration must be made to adopt these technologies to gain either a market leader position or to remain relevant among the current target market.

One Brazilian university over-invested too quickly into mobile learning and as a result, lost opportunity with computer-based learning. The same can also hold true for marketing, as practitioners need to assess the value and return of new, technology-driven marketing initiatives, such as mobile marketing and data-mining techniques.

CONCLUSION

Distance education and marketing will continue to evolve; however, it is unlikely that it will mature any time soon in a way where academic institutions can apply stable technologies in delivery content to students and for marketers to use media with which they are exceptionally experienced and comfortable. For marketing practitioners, search engine optimization has become more manageable, only to be supplanted by the complexities of using social media effectively. In addition, new developments around local search and customization again have search engine optimization a moving topic for marketing practitioners to master.

Regardless, marketing practitioners and academic leaders should search for new marketing tools and distance education technologies and assess how they can work with existing or future marketing planning efforts. While the tools and technologies are helpful to many, they need to fit into the unique situation and context for the institution as what works for one organization does not necessarily work for all (Fong & Bailey, 2006). Academic institutions need to avoid this trap, but also make sure they have the skills, talent, organizational structure and resources necessary to adopt those tools and technologies that can surely add value in bringing distance education to the consumer.

This collection of distance education marketing is a powerful resource in the constantly changing marketing profession and distance education field for practitioners and academic leaders.

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