

Chapter 8

Marketing Distance Education Programs: Building a Customer Orientation

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ABSTRACT

This chapter attempts to put forward the customer orientation in designing online education (OE) services. The study also tries to reflect an in-depth understanding about the vital role of marketing practices on the online education programs (OEPs) and to show the online education administrators, coordinators, and practitioners the significance of building customer orientation for distance education courses. For this purpose, this chapter ties the key titles of marketing area of knowledge and relevant literature on OEPs. Customer behavior in OE services, positioning OEPs, branding, pricing, and promoting of OE services, designing a customer oriented online environment and managing customer interactions and people factor in OE services are the issues covered throughout the chapter. This marketing and customer orientation can be particularly significant for education industry where marketing applications and culture are not well established and appreciated.

The chapter argues that OE service providers require well designed marketing strategies and should differentiate the institution and the programs from competition. Hence, designing successful OEPs relies heavily on building an organization-wide customer orientation and a significant marketing perspective.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60960-074-7.ch008

INTRODUCTION

There has been a recent shift from conventional means of education towards more student oriented, flexible and customized ways of learning modes. In line with the technological advances, distance and online education designs have gained an increasing acceptance and credence in particularly higher education industry. Distance learning is defined as “the acquisition of knowledge and skills through mediated information and instruction, encompassing all technologies and other forms of learning at a distance” (United States Distance Learning Association, 2009). With the rapid growth of the Internet, online distance learning has become a viable form of education (Granitz and Greene, 2003).

The current emphasis on online education can be explained by various interrelated factors. It might be claimed that online education has become fairly widespread and gained a lot significance in the last few decades due to the growth of accessibility through the spreading of the Internet, the current progress in information and communication technologies in general, the demand for continuous learning related to globalization and change to a knowledge-society and the individual interest in lifelong learning (Tellerup and Helms). Similarly, Demiray and Sever (2009: 26) also argued that the education systems have been globally improving during the mid 1990s, when the internet services were introduced and adopted information, communication and educational technologies for developing teaching and learning processes with an aim of providing world-class or an excellent ‘onclick’ education on demand to the learners. Format of online delivery of programs through the Internet is quite effective for learners placed geographically at distant places (Demiray and Sever, 2009: 26). The field of online education continues to be the strongest growing branch of education at all levels. More and more institutions have been offering online education programs and thereby

number and variety of programs launched to the online education market are gradually increasing. There is a growing need to carry out more customer oriented analysis of the effectiveness of distance education programs since students are demanding personalized, up to date and high quality education services.

With the intensified pace of globalization and increasing customer expectations, education sector, like many other industries, faces a rising competition in terms of serving customers better. In today’s education environments, students no longer see themselves as a standardized consumption unit of educational service. Instead, they want to be treated themselves as “customized” and their needs and wants should be well understood and fulfilled carefully by the education providers. Thus, students need to be perceived as end users or customers in the emerging education market. Institutions require innovative marketing strategies in this highly competitive market for education services (Mukerji and Tripathi, 2004: 14-27).

Since online education programs are services in nature, the use of marketing concept to the field of online or distance education can also be valid for the effective management of online education services process. However, when universities think of marketing, they often imagine big advertising and promotion budgets, glossy brochures, intense selling activities generally and applying marketing principles poorly (Irene and Forbes, 2009). Since the industry historically has not been involved in structured and intense marketing efforts, higher education institutions were not able to develop marketing orientation and stance comparing to many other service sectors. Viewing students as customers neither is a discreditable matter nor harms the institution’s academic reputation. In contrast, this understanding provides a competitive advantage and enhances an institution’s ability to attract, retain and serve its customers better than competition (Seeman and O’Hara, 2006). Hence education institutions and administrators require a marketing orientation, customer consciousness,

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