Chapter 14
E–Service Delivery in Higher Education:
Meeting MBA Student Expectations

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ABSTRACT

This study explores graduate students' expectations regarding website design in higher education. Focus group discussions and the Kano method are used to improve the college website experience of Master of Business Administration students. Student survey results (n = 110) suggest 23 features describing an ideal college website. Results guide college website design according to three need-based groups; basic, performance, and excitement to improve website value to students and ultimately student loyalty.

INTRODUCTION

Applying concepts in product satisfaction and customer loyalty to the service context of higher education is well-documented in the literature (Bruning, 2002; Elliot & Healy, 2001; Guolla, 1999; Hennig-Thurau, Langer, & Hansen, 2001; McCollough & Gremler, 1999; Vander Schee, 2010a; Voon, 2007). Focusing on graduate education, with an emphasis on Master of Business Administration (MBA) programs in particular has also garnered much attention (Dailey et al., 2006;

Heslop & Nadeau, 2010; Johnson, Thomas, & Peck, 2010). However the link between the MBA student segment and e-service experience via the institutional website is not as clearly understood. Although marketers in higher education understand the mandate to meet student needs and to anticipate student expectations (Oyvind, 2008), guidance is needed to assess these needs regarding a college or university's website.

The purpose of this study is to offer guidance on the creation and management of MBA student website content, a website's mix of product, in-

formation and services. A list of student-centric features is generated using focus group discussions; the Kano method is used to structure an online survey and classify survey responses that are tabulated to offer administrators and website designers clear guidance on prioritizing website performance features to satisfy and excite Master of Business Administration (MBA) students with a custom and relevant college website experience.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The MBA degree by virtue of its costs, and often times cessation of full-time employment from 18 months to two years makes providing the best possible service on the part of the institution all the more critical (Heslop & Nadeau, 2010). The MBA degree can act as the collegiate flagship program, thus effectively positioning the MBA program can increase the value of the university as a whole (Goldgehn & Kane, 1997). Part of positioning is living the brand identity by meeting student needs and staying ahead of future students' expectations. How seriously an institution takes the task of meeting and exceeding needs is often reflected by the features of the collegiate website. Indeed the institutional website is the common portal for students to access information and interface with the MBA community. The fact that some institutions do not make website functionality design and features a priority is ironic because MBA degree programs espouse services marketing in the classroom (Nicholls et al., 1995).

Institutions that do provide value and satisfy customer-defined needs benefit from increased organization identification, or belongingness among its customers (i.e., students) (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Positive and satisfying interactions make customers feel understood and appreciated which leads to a commitment lasting beyond the service interaction (Gruen, Summers, & Acito, 2000).

This increased connection and committment is where MBA students have a greater perceived relationship with the institution and thus are more likely to speak highly of, and make donations to the MBA program post-graduation (Johnson, Thomas, & Peck, 2010). Therefore providing good e-service that meets student needs helps to build a community environment in the MBA program and serves as an investment in future relationships and revenue (Anctil, 2008).

Failing to meet student expectations is rather risky if the practice becomes routine as students always have the choice to discontinue in the program or transfer to another institution (Jones & Sasser, 1995). However, colleges and universities also have the unique opportunity to augment services to meet student needs rather quickly (Fournier & Mick, 1999). This may not be as evident in curricular offering, but is certainly the case with institutional service offerings. One such augmented service, e-service delivery via the college website, by its very nature must be adaptive to student needs. It also serves as an opportunity to go beyond customer expectations which are said to create a positive surprise or feelings of delight (Bitner, Brown, & Meuter, 2000). It is this delight that can lead to customer loyalty or student retention as well as referrals to prospective students which leads to future enrollment growth or building the brand identity (Szymanski & Henard, 2001). One challenge concerning the institutional website presence is identifying and prioritizing student needs and best investing time and resources in providing e-service quality with good product feature performance.

Historic approaches to measure e-service quality were founded on a linear combination of attributes (Cristobal, Flavian, & Guinaliu, 2007), though others believe e-service quality is likely a non-linear function (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Malhotra, 2002) offering less biased measures of relative importance weights (Carman, 2000).

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