Chapter 16
Managing an E-Marketing Plan for an Online Learning Curriculum

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ABSTRACT

The design of an online learning curriculum is not the end of the work for that course or curriculum. Further work involves a marketing outreach to potential learners in order to encourage their enrollment and participation in the course. In the electronic age, it is not just sufficient to send out information through the electronic mailing lists of a department or through local media or established university channels; rather, it's critical to position an online learning course or sequenced curriculum globally to most effectively capitalize on the electronic connectivity of the Internet and Web. Online courses are not just there for the convenience of geographically localized learners who have busy schedules. Reaching a broader potential audience of learners may lead to several types of competitive advantage: a broader diversity of international learners; a stronger tuition base to support the teaching-and-learning work; positive challenges for the instructors and subject matter experts, and heightened and less provincial learning opportunities. Further, those on the development team have a critical role to play in terms of marketing an online course—because of the intimate knowledge of the course curriculum, its design, and the targeted learners.

INTRODUCTION

Today's modern university students inhabit plenty of electronic spaces. They socialize online through social networking sites and virtual immersive worlds. They connect in real-time real-space ways using mobile devices. Many earn course credits and full degrees online. For comprehensive marketing plans, universities and colleges have been working to move to electronic spaces as well—in authentic ways—that show their connections to traditional-aged learners. Creating a social presence in virtual spaces and powerful interactivity that is meaningful to potential and current students may comprise competitive advantage for an institution of higher learning.

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Marketing in higher education, as in other fields, deals with multiple publics (a marketing term that refers to defined groups of stakeholders). Examples of external publics include the larger community, the business community, the military community, and the grant funding institutions. Internally, there are the institution's employees (administrators, faculty, and staff). Partway in between are the transitory students, the vendors, and others who are both part of the institution but also part of the external environment. Institutions of higher education need to maintain high profiles for their integrity, professionalism, and skills in order to attract grant dollars and maintain smooth interrelationships. The Internet and WWW, with the numerous sites and apps and services, serve the main external publics. In general, the intranet (internal protected Internet) serves the internal publics; the Internet serves the broader external publics, and the extranet (semi-public protected Internet) serves the in-between publics (particularly vendors). Public relations endeavors reach out to the local media and larger communities to push positive stories of research and professional collegiality.

Universities are protecting their brand identity and the various artifacts representing that. They are protecting their academic reputations. They are sharing their sports histories. They are lauding the alumni who have done well in the world. They are sharing news of success with potential donors to the school. They are encouraging student retention in the school. They are encouraging faculty and staff participation in in-house fund-raising campaigns. They are sharing news of research breakthroughs in their ranks. Marketing supports direct recruitment efforts—by making a university education seem more attainable and less intimidating.

The professional marketers on campus work on the school's overall image and standing in the image world. They are the ones who set the marketing goals (based on the school's main competencies and interests as well as their student statistics), consider the broader audience, and measure the outcomes of their endeavors. They set clear guidelines on when logos might be used and when certain slogans might be applied. In terms of formal messaging, that comes from the communications and marketing organs of a university or college. Information is vetted and packaged for delivery into media channels. The press release that is officially sent out to the world is official and defined. This message is created to have one official voice. The environment that the data are released into though is one with many competing narratives—meta-narratives (grand ones), narratives, and counter-narratives—information released "into the wild" by people and organizations with various interests and motives, with or without ties to the institution. A sense of reality is formed not just from the formal voice of officialdom but is a coalescence of crowd-sourcing. All people who are interested then have a hand in the definition of a university or college.

After the creation of an online learning curriculum by a development team (the instructional designer, the subject matter experts, videographers, code developers, photographers, graphic artists, and others), the work has not been completed. Rather, the piece that is often neglected or simply passed off to the marketing department of the university or a specific office, is that of marketing that curriculum to potential target learners. To fully exploit the affordances of an online curriculum and skilled instructors, a department or college would do well to tailor a marketing (with e-marketing as a part of the overall plan) plan for various curriculums—to both diversify the learners in a course and to create a stronger tuition base for the support of the learning. After all, it is not in a university's interest to invest so much into an online course curriculum only to have it languish with low enrollments.

A Review of the Literature

To set the context, it helps to consider the heightened competition in an internationalized educational environment, with higher educa-

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