

Chapter 40

Marketing Online Education

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ABSTRACT

In any marketing campaign, whether it is for soap, financial services, or online education, there are a range of important issues to consider. Any educator will have their own list, but this chapter will suggest that an online education marketer will need to consider at least the following: The e-learning product itself – its strengths, weaknesses, possible competition and – increasingly in an era of concern for the global environment – its sustainability; The potential customers for the product – how they access and use the product and how effective it is in meeting their needs; The costs of the product both to the institution and to the customers. These costs will not just be financial, but social and psychological.

This chapter will examine these factors in turn and will maintain that there are serious issues in all of them that need careful unpacking before marketing takes place.

THE E-LEARNING PRODUCT ITSELF

E-Learning: Popularity

E-learning is not a risk-free product for institutions, nor as we will see, for students. Anyone thinking of marketing e-learning for their institution needs to think carefully about some of the projects that have gone before and not been entirely success-

ful. In fact the list of ventures that have closed is quite a long one, several based on quite illustrious institutions:

- NYU Online - closed - loss \$21.5m
- Cardean University - closed - loss \$100m
- Columbia U. - closed - loss \$25m
- UKeU - closed - loss £62m
- The Scottish e-university - loss not published

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There are a number of others which have also closed and any marketer should ask why. Although not all observers would agree, I believe that there is a common thread to the closures – these ventures were unsuccessful because they failed to recruit enough students to make them viable. A report into the failure of the UKeU found that a great deal of the allocated resource had gone into the writing of the learning platform but that it had attracted fewer than 6000 students and would never become viable.

This raises the question of whether ‘total’ e-learning (where everything is online including all course materials and support) is as popular with students as some educationalists believe. It is important to remember that prospective students may not welcome the prospect of courses that are entirely online. Many students still prefer to read paper copy and they may be right to do so: research (O’Hara et al, 1997) suggests that reading online is up to 30% less efficient in terms of comprehension than reading online. Certainly in at least one successful distance education institution known to the author – the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand – student surveys consistently feed back that students prefer their course material to be paper-based. It maybe that the most successful e-learning will delivered by a mixed mode – course material on paper and student support and teaching via the internet (or increasingly through mobile devices).

Thus it may be a mistake to believe that e-learning is automatically popular with potential students – it will be important to undertake some careful market research to establish just what the potential audience is and what modes of delivery will be the most popular.

E-Learning: Access

Part of that market research will be to quantify the level of access to the Internet amongst the potential audience. Even in a relatively technically advanced country such as the UK, nearly 30% of

households still do not have broadband access to the Internet, and whilst there are many internet access points in libraries, cafés and so on, it is not clear if these offer sufficient access to undertake completely online courses. For institutions delivering post-graduate studies this may not matter: for institutions with a widening participation ethos in their mission, it will be a serious issue if choosing e-learning excludes a substantial part of the already educationally disadvantaged population in their country.

E-Learning: Costs to the Institution

It has been commonly assumed by many institutions that e-learning offers a cheaper way of providing education (the costs to students are a different matter as we shall see). In fact this is not necessarily the case. Two of the most distinguished writers on the costs of distance education, Rumble (2004) and Hulsmann, (2002) both agree that e-learning is often as expensive for institutions to provide as conventional distance learning.

Of course e-learning allows for the globalisation of education enabling the delivery of services and materials speedily internationally. But that again means that any marketer needs to be very aware of the global education scene which is one of great competition. Just to take a recent snapshot:

- *Newsweek* announced in August 07 that ‘Global education: the race is on. Rivalry among top schools is fiercer than ever – and West may be losing its lead’.
- *The Times* in June 07 had the headline ‘Coca-Cola promises its retail university will be the real thing’.
- *Singapore’s* Global Schoolhouse recently announced its aim to attract 150 000 international students by 2015
- *China* is known to aim to be a net importer of students within ten years.
- *Malaysia* seeks to become educational hub in Asia and to set up a campus in London

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