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MARKETING EFFECTIVENESS OF EDUCATIONAL SERVICES ON WEBSITES

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ABSTRACT

Marketing educational programs in a complex world inspired the investigation of relationships between education marketing and digital media. The research questions were: Which organizations are promoting educational programs? What are the components of the programs/products? The research considered how they differentiate themselves, including their implied value proposition and interaction on digital channels. The study was to better understand what educational programs are offering, which services provide these benefits as outcomes, classify how they are promoting themselves, and evaluate/explain how that message is being communicated. The top 20 organizations who fit this web search were selected and their digital marketing was analyzed using personal computers. Researchers compared .ORG, .GOV, .EDU, and .COM types of educational organizations. The research examined how schools promote and deliver services to their members, parents and students. Using data of: 1) live on-demand chat 2) scheduled chat 3) social media 4) blog 5) interactive and 6) searchable website. The highest scoring website was WeAreTeachers.com, considering usability, efficiency, accessibility, learnability and satisfaction. Success was determined when the content on the websites was accessible and visitors could find what they were seeking.

JEL: M30, M31

KEYWORDS: Information Seeking, Website Perceptions, Content, Promotion, Consumer Behavior

INTRODUCTION

Organizations providing education-related services to schools across the country are challenged to use the Internet more effectively to both promote and deliver their services. Whether state boards of education, various associations of educators, not-for-profit organizations or for-profit companies, the realities of effective use of the Internet is vital to their reaching their intended education markets. As with all marketers, these organizations must address what is commonly known as the Marketing Mix: Product, Place, Promotion, and Price. The digital environment requires fresh ideas about each of these 4 Ps. The traditional ways of interacting with customers often do not translate to this new environment. Marketers must adapt to these changes or find they have much less access to their primary markets. The products (including services) provided by education-related services to schools and educators can look quite different from what was traditionally produced on paper in analog form. While the essence of the product often remains the same, how it is packaged must be quite different. It is critical that these providers carefully examine what they offer. Is their product line simply what they have offered in the past or is it adapted to the evolving needs of their customers? How have they modified the product mix offered? How well aligned is their product offering with the digital environment? Place is the delivery of product to customers. In this environment, the distribution primarily happens digitally but some organizations retain an in-person component. Two important issues in this arena are ease of use and quality of the visual presentation. Many marketers simply present the same information in the same way on both the virtual and in-person environments.

The essence of promotion is how an organization presents what it has to offer. Generally, promotion is expected to: 1) provide information to customers, 2) increase demand, 3) differentiate the product, 4) enhance the product's value, and 5) stabilize sales. Marketers of educational services, especially in this digital age, are faced with new challenges to accomplish these tasks. Further complicating this challenge is the need to sufficiently understand the organizations' customers to tailor the language used in communications. Customers want and need to know the cost of what is being offered to them. This value equation is an interplay between the customers' desire for the product and the marketer's pricing strategy. The pricing is impacted by whether the organization has a mandate to distribute information, to include information as a service included for members, or plan to sell information for profit. All three types of organizations are operating in the educational services marketplace.

This research is intended to explore how a variety of organizations address these marketing challenges. This task leads to the following research questions that guided this study: 1. What services and information are offered?, 2. How is the organization and its services presented on its website?, and 3. What is the organization's implied value proposition to potential users/customers? Marketing educational programs in a complicated world led the research team to investigate which companies are promoting educational programs and how are they promoting them. These educational programs were challenged to solve problems arising from the following issues: 1. Establish a positive school culture, 2. Increase academic performance, 3. Improve safety, 4. Decrease problem behavior, and 5. Create physically active classrooms/education. The goal of the research was to better understand which educational programs are offering services that provide these benefits as outcomes, classify how they are promoting themselves, and then evaluate/explain how that message is being communicated.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In today's learning environments, students and parents are searching for outcomes. They have access to digital devices such as desktop personal computer and laptops. They also use tablets and mobile phones. The internet is a home for knowledge. Muir (2014) looked at an organization that is innovating education, the Kahn Academy, and how students accessed online educational websites. Their perceptions of how useful they were varied. The traditional role of the teacher was being challenged, as evidenced by 57,000,000 searches for "help with mathematics" on Google (Muir, 2014). What outcomes are those who are searching on personal computers for educational programs looking for? The study on these outcomes was based on three previous research studies: 1) (DePorter & Hernacki, 1992) with Quantum Learning and Supercamp, focused on outcomes of K-12 education. 2) DePorter, Reardon, & Singer-Nourie (1999) 8 Keys to Success, and, 3) Given, and DePorter (2015), transformation due to human imitation of positive interactions, and goal setting behaviors that lead to achievement in K-12 schools.

Search Engines

Using search engines is one of the ways to discover what we are looking for in a digital environment, similar to how we used a card catalog at the library in the past, only now we have access to every card and cross referenced in trillions of results. The major search engines currently are Google, YouTube, Bing, and Yahoo, with Google's engine having more than a 72% share of the searching behaviors. Few would argue that this is the dominant search platform, especially as their parent company, Alphabet, also owns YouTube, the second largest search engine. The role of a search engine is to provide relevant search results quickly (Visser & Weideman, 2014). Search engines use algorithms that are designed to scale well with very large datasets. They are optimized for fast and efficient access. A search engine helps to organize results by using an algorithm to serve the results that are accurate. The web is a vast collection of completely uncontrolled heterogeneous documents, indexed by data such as hyperlinks and formatting (Brin & Page, 1998). How usable the website is depends on the visitor's ability to connect with the information. Removing obstacles that could hurt their experiences will allow for higher levels of

satisfaction by users. Once a website loses the visitor because of usability, they are unlikely to visit again (Visser & Weideman, 2014). Evidence that the classification models of searching was documented. This was based on restaurants and getting info about the details users needed, by going to content websites for the information search. Hsu & Walter (2015) looked at how consumers in need search for information on the internet. There were four conclusions on how consumers search the Internet. (Hsu & Walter, 2015): 1) Certain users create Internet searches using the dominant search engines, such as Google, 2) Some people go directly to a content website, 3) Others have their "go to" search engines, and 4) Those who search vary in how extensively they search.

Marketing on the Internet

Internet access services, such as websites, are the dominant communications tool for internet exchange and sharing (Jarret, 2015). The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has regulated the telecommunications industry since 1934 and starting with dial up services, regulates the Internet, as part of the public good. In 1996, Congress drew up two categories, telecom services and information services. Information services, such as Facebook and YouTube, are mostly exempt from FCC regulations. The FCC created the Open Internet Order in 2015 with strong rules about net neutrality. This law requires that carriers cannot block, throttle or prioritize for pay, i.e., no fast lanes on the Internet (Jarret, 2015). Given that all websites have equal access on the World Wide Web, how do websites get seen? The outcomes of digital marketing can be the following: increasing awareness, brand image, esteem, sales, loyalty or commitment (Flores, 2013). Good websites should be easy to use, useful and easy to understand and navigate (Aziz & Kamaludin, 2014). Pynoo & Tondeur, et al (2012) looked at secondary school teachers and how they accessed educational websites, based on usage data and online questionnaires. They tried to predict which websites would be most used and therefore useful. They also considered consumer behavior and found that searching for and downloading material was the number one use, not sharing content. The predictors for this behavior were individual's attitude and perceived usefulness of the material downloaded. Digital online relationships differ from analog offline or in-person relationships and theories emerge about the source of these differences, including anonymity. (Kozlenkova, Palmatier, et al, 2017) For a marketer there is a double edge sword; an anonymous relationship can promote both risky trial and easy termination. Two-way promotional communication in online relationships, rather than unilateral relationships help consumers differentiate, make choices and reduce risk, therefore increases sales revenues and shortens the decision-making time period and have a positive financial impact on purchasing and revenues (Kozlenkova, Palmatier, et al, 2017).

How do we promote and get the attention of our audience online? Using graphics is one way to get attention, as well as using photographs. Ozmen (2015) looked at analyzing users attitudes about online content, including how information is retrieved and processed. They considered how online ads should be presented for more effective responses. Digital users were attracted by keywords and the initial digital presentation. Users gave more importance to specific details over general information, indicating that being explicitly clear in content may lead to even greater value to users. Consumer attitudes toward information retrieval and processing made a difference. Relating to our study of educational marketing programs, in the Business to Business (B2B) space, web pages and value-add content helped a business stand out among competitors. Holliman & Rowley (2014) reviewed digital marketing practices and suggested insights on what would improve content relevance, especially since the marketing industry is facing a decline in effectiveness in what they termed, interruptive marketing techniques. The following terms were used: useful, relevant, compelling and timely. The cultural change to "helping" is better than "selling" in these cases examined. Content marketing requires different marketing objectives, tactics, metrics and skills than those with traditional marketing approaches. Digital Marketing on personal computers has replaced some traditional interruptive marketing tactics such as direct mail, door to door and telemarketing, which have been declining in effectiveness based on price/value. Interactive marketing

is useful and valued for achieving and sustaining a trust in the brand (Holliman & Rowley, 2014). Consideration needs to be given to the relevance, usefulness, timeliness and degree of interest.

Stanaland (2010) looks at design of web pages and consumer behavior of how different segments of people access them. If a company knows in advance the type of consumer who will be searching or seeking, that can help them to design a more appropriate website. For educational program marketers, they may have a need to reach the seekers, who want a controlled environment and simple design rather than the surfers who value the interactivity. These marketers may choose a tactic that presents websites more simply and give users more control when they visit. Controlling distribution via the Internet has been an issue for the hotel industry (Carroll & Siguaw, 2003). Internet based room reservations presented challenges for scaling their selling of perishable rooms, and lead to the success of startups like Airbnb and other travel booking websites.

The effect of Internet distribution has had an effect on brick-and-mortar sales (Pozzi, 2013) and the music distribution (Sparrow, 2006). Revenues increase overall, in this supermarket study, and even more when the chain stores face more competitors. For the consumer, purchase behavior tends to differ across the online and offline channels, based on tangibility, (Degeratu, Rangaswamy, and Jianan, 2000) product weight (Chintagunta, Chu and Cebollada, 2012), pricing (Chu et al., 2010), and assortment (Zhang et al, 2010). Metrics are more important than ever when it comes to digital marketing. Key Performance Indicators (KPI's) to measure effectiveness and Return on Investment (ROI). Globally speaking, what is too expensive or too hard to measure will be eliminated from the tactics (Flores, 2013).

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

This research study began in 2012 with a Meta study on Quantum Learning and how they were effective in the advancement of educational programs. From April 2016 through November 2016, data was gathered. Building on that research, the key words were the outcomes of these programs, as that would be what users of educational programs would be seeking in their search processes. Here are the steps taken. 1. Searched for providers of identified outcomes, using Google, using variations of key words associated with five categories identified by Quantum Learning (DePorter, 2012), 2. The researchers visited and documented content for each website on October 11, 2016, 3. Visited websites using different personal computers (desktops, laptops) with different operating systems (PC's, Macs) and different browsers (Firefox, Chrome), and 4. Assessed the digital approach used by the identified organizations.

Each researcher searched on Google for the same five terms using different browsers to find out which programs were promoting these outcomes. Individual websites of educational programs with high rankings were selected from the outcomes of the internet search. How these organizations used these terms for promotional messaging, was considered as well as the product or service that they are promoting. The focus was on the educational organizations that fit at least four of our outcomes. We considered the type of organization, and whether they were using paid search or organic Search Engine Optimization (SEO). We gathered data on the following factors: 1) live on-demand chat 2) scheduled chat 3) social media 4) blog) 5) Interactive 6) Searchable website. The ranking system of higher scores meant that the website experiences were interactive (Aziz & Kamaludin, 2014). We considered the following factors 1.) Usability – Effectiveness: To what degree can the user complete the goal? 2.) Efficiency – Are resources needed by the user to complete goal available? 3.) Accessibility – Can users get access to what is needed to complete the goal? 4.) Learnability – Can the user learn to interact with the website? and 5.) Satisfaction – To what degree is the user satisfied when interacting with the website? The first level of examination of the websites consisted of looking for evidence that the site was addressing one or more of the search criteria. We initially identified 20 websites by using the 5 key phrases (i.e., keywords) in searches using Google. We then narrowed down our 20 websites to a list of 11 finalists, who had at least three of our key phrases. (A description of the websites are found in Appendix 1).

Once these websites were identified, each was visited separately by each of the researchers to make a judgment about whether the search criteria were significantly addressed on the website. At a minimum, websites were expected to make information available to assist visitors in the selected areas or indicate clearly that such information would be available upon joining the organization or purchase of services. Those websites that addressed a minimum of three of the five criteria were retained for the study.

Table 1: Search Engine Results from Keyword Search, March 2016

Organization	Org Type	School Culture	Academic Performance	Emotional Safety	Decrease Behavior Problems	Physically Active Class Room
New York State Board of Ed.	GOV	X	X	X	X	X
Greater Good Science Center	ORG	X	X	X	X	X
American School Counselor Assoc (ASCA)	ORG	X	X	X	X	
Association of Suspervision & Curriculum Development (ASCD)	ORG	X	X	X	X	
Counseling in Schools	ORG	X	X	X	X	
Edutopia	ORG	X	X	X	X	
FISH!	COM	X	X	X	X	
National Assoc.of Elementary School Principals (NAESP)	ORG	X	X	X	X	
Success for All Foundation	ORG	X	X	X	X	
We Are Techers	COM	X		X		X
National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments	GOV	X	X	X		

Table 1 identifies the presence of the various search criteria. The organizations presented in this table were those organizations that addressed at least three of the five criteria.

Table 1 lists the top websites in our search results based on the five criteria selected. Two of the selected had all five categories in our search results. Seven of the websites had four criteria. Two websites had three of the criteria.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In Table 2, the researchers report on the ways in which the website offered opportunities for interaction with visitors. It is a report of whether there is live or scheduled chat, blog, interctive elements and the search website option. None of the websites used live chat and only one offered a scheduled chat. Four of the websites had a blog. Two websites offered interaction. Seven of the websites offered a search of the website. National Association of Elementary School Principles had scheduled chat, blog and search option on the website.

Table 2: Interactive Analysis of Websites

Website	Live Chat	Scheduled Chat	Blog	Interactive	Search Website
NY State Ed Dept.	no	no	yes	No	yes-Google
Greater Good Science Center	no	no	no	Take a quiz	yes-Google
American School Counselor Association	no	no	yes/vlog*	no	yes
Assoc. Supervision& Curriculum Dev.	no	no	no	no	yes
Counseling in Schools	no	no	yes	no	yes
Edutopia	no	no	no	no	no
FISH!	no	no	no	no	no
Nat Association of Elementary School Principals	no	yes	yes	no	yes
Success for All Foundation	no	no	no	no	no
We Are Teachers	no	no	no	no	no
National Center on Safe Supportive Learning	no	no	no	Take a poll	yes

*Table 2 displays the categories of interaction available on the website. A "no" indicates the website does not offer this type of interaction to site visitors. *indicates video blog*

The websites were then evaluated using the five criteria developed by Aziz & Kamaludin (2014), Usability, Efficiency, Accessibility, Learnability, and Satisfaction. Table 3 reports the results of the website evaluations. Each website was rated on each of the criteria which yielded both individual scores as well as an overall rating. This process allowed for discernment among the websites and several were superior to the others. Four of the ten websites had the same highest total score in this process. Three websites were consistently the lowest scores in each category. The learnability scores were the lowest scored category overall, indicating that the websites were not necessarily easy to interact with and learn. This is ironic as they are all in the education industry. The highest score was 20/20 for We Are Teachers. Tied with 19/20 points were FISH! Philosophy, Edutopia, ASCD (Association for Supervising and Curriculum Development and ASCA (American School Counselors Association).

Table 3 reports the following data. Three websites stood out to the researchers: FISH! Philosophy, We Are Teachers, and Edutopia. These websites had a clear webpage that was useful and responsive. The FISH! Philosophy website had prominent links to social media, including Facebook, Twitter, Linkedin, and YouTube platforms, and clear 'contact us' information, including a web capture form which set expectations as soon as visitors arrived on the website. There were no live chats offered in any of the educational websites, which seemed to be an interactivity opportunity missed by all of the organizations in the study. Although the New York State website had extensive content that would be helpful to educators, it consistently rated at the bottom of the five measurement scales for this study. The website was simply a document repository that could be accessed if the visitor knew the exact document being sought. It did not allow for easy browsing of documents or searching by key words. It also was consistently very slow to load; even the home page took longer than expected time for any information to appear on the computer, tablet, or mobile screen. Berkeley's website was interactive, friendly and engaging. It had content that appeared to be valued by frequent users. However, the Berkeley.edu website was too busy, with so many options that it made choices of where to focus more difficult for the user. The organization of the website did not guide the attention of the visitor. The National Association of

Elementary School Principals website reflected a leadership-oriented experience and scored more moderately on the measurement scales.

Table 3: Results of Website Evaluations

	Usability	Efficiency	Accessibility	Learnability	Satisfaction	Total
Counselors in Schools	1	1	1	1	1	5
New York Dept. of Ed.	1	1	1	1	1	5
Success for All	1	1	1	1	1	5
Greater Good	2	3	4	2	2	13
Safe support	2	2	4	3	2	13
NAESP	4	3	3	3	3	16
ASCA	4	4	4	3	4	19
ASCD	4	4	4	3	4	19
Edutopia	4	4	4	3	4	19
FISH! Philosophy	4	4	4	3	4	19
We Are Teachers	4	4	4	4	4	20
Total	**31**	**31**	**34**	**27**	**30**	

Table 3 displays the results of the application of the evaluation criteria from Aziz & Kamaludin (2014). We Are Teachers was the most consistent in its performance against these criteria.

The FISH! promotion focused on selling their products and services. Scoring well on the measurement scales, FISH! offered an interactive customer experience using the tools on the website. Most of the other educational websites did not provide a memorable user experience, because they were mostly about them only and not about the benefits they brought to the user. They seemed very self-promoting and bureaucratic. They looked like they were created by committees, rather than to service a specific audience. They were trying to satisfy many audiences, and therefore satisfied very few. For these reasons, these websites scored lower on the measurement scales. One .org that did get positive interaction was Success for All Foundation (successforall.org). Even though the website was not interactive, the content was effective through the technique of presenting the story of the brand. We are Teachers, FISH! Philosophy and Edutopia were the top three most effective websites on PC's when looking at usability, efficiency, accessibility, learnability, satisfaction and a combination of these (Aziz & Kamaludin, 2014).

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The websites in the study ranged from government agencies to private non-profit organizations to private for-profit companies. For some organizations, the website content was publicly available for free. For others, beyond information to tempt potential members, the information was behind a member login page. The commercial organizations used the website as a lead generator for future sales opportunities and presented enough information to elicit an inquiry about purchasing. The key learnings from the research: 1) Websites with interactive opportunities helped the visit be experienced as more relevant. This allows the visitor to quickly drill down to the information most desired. 2) A focus on the visitor's perspective more than the organization's contributed to a more engaged visit. For example, rather than write, "we're great", successful websites ask "how can we be of service to you?" 3) Effectively used, photos and short videos significantly enhance the visitor experience. Ultimately, the challenge for each website is to weave these approaches into an effective promotional offering that reaches its target market and engages it successfully. The most successful websites were easy to find using a variety of key words in a search and presented the resources necessary for a visitor to accomplish the purpose of the visit. In addition, success was determined when he content on the websites was accessible and visitors could find what they were seeking. When navigation of the websites was straightforward, visitors could easily learn how to interact with the site. Relevant websites provided a positive experience, creating trust in engaging with

the site. The research shows the top five organizations for effectiveness were: WeAreTeachers, Edutopia, ASCD, ASCA, and FISH! Philosophy. The lowest rated websites were: New York Board of Education, Counselors in Schools, and Success for All. What is the usefulness of the study? The results of this study can provide marketers, educators, and non-profit organizations with important guidance as they evaluate and/or revise their websites. Other educational programs, especially K-12, who may be thinking about building or rebuilding a website may be alerted to what they need to use to promote, look, feel and operate more effectively.

Limitations

Although different browsers were used in parallel to examine the websites, the researchers know that websites may display quite differently on different browsers. Timing makes a difference as these are all digital pages, which can be changed instantly. It's possible that some of the websites are already seeing much improved effectiveness since this study was conducted. Internet search engines are dependent on the search algorithms used. Google search results are different based on location, device and search history. The algorithm causes results to be skewed. For example, if an educator in California was looking for an educational program in Austria, and then searched for clothing, the searcher may find results will be retail shops near Austria, not in California. Research initiated on the east coast of the United States might result in important differences in which organizations provide these educational services than this study initiated on the west coast. However, once a visitor logs on to any website, the location of that visitor would have no effect on evaluation of the website. So, the process of the evaluation of the effectiveness of the content on the websites will not be a limitation of the study.

Recommend Further Study

What issues are still needing to be raised? Is this pioneering new research territory in this field? Since the authors could not find any previous research in educational websites, they believe it represents new territory in the field of educational program marketing. This research could be expanded into the Services Marketing field. A similar study could be conducted in the health care field, the only industry that is larger than the two trillion dollar educational program market in the US. In future studies, the authors may evaluate the categories of educational organizations, reviewing .com vs. .net, educational vs. commercial venture, or universities vs. government agencies.

APPENDIX

Here are a few of our exploratory findings about specific websites in the study, which were for-profit, non-profit, public, and private organizations. The New York State Education System, a public non-profit organization, appears to present its information as part of compliance to legal requirements that such information be available, rather than as a communications tool. Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center is a public non-profit organization. The Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development, a private non-profit association is membership focused. They offer services to subscribing members, in the form of paid educational packages that add value for members. ASCD aims for better learners through books, seminars, and more. Their web experience on PC was evaluated as more effective on four out of five of the measurement scales.The National Association of Elementary School Principals, a private non-profit organization for school principals. The website seeks membership from elementary school principals. The National Association of Elementary School Principals website reflects a leadership-oriented experience and scored more moderately on the measurements scales.

We Are Teachers is an educator's website, with ideas, inspiring activities and advice for teachers. We Are Teachers is an online community for educators providing classroom ideas and giveaways to inspire educators in K-12 schools. WeAreTeachers promotes that teachers do more than teach, and speaks to the

most challenging jobs in the world that also is one of the most rewarding jobs. Teachers relate to the way their jobs can be improved with their tools and ideas. One example is a visual image of a smiling woman in a swimming pool about "10 Things Teachers Should Do in the Next 90 Days."Edutopia is a private, non-profit organization. They were founded by the (George) Lucas Educational Foundation and are entertainment-based, and reflects significant resources and creativity associated with a successful organization.Fish! Philosophy uses training videos from Pike's Peak Market in Seattle to help organizations improve teamwork, customer service, employee engagement, leadership and retention through their special training methods. Edutopia is an .org, non-profit organization that looks at assessment, projects for learning, and develops teachers. They use the tagline "join the movement for change" to motivate others to participate.Success for All Foundation (successforall.org) website is effective in telling the story about the programs in pre-school to middle school with USDOE13 grant money.FISH! Philosophy and We Are Teachers were commercial ventures, as reflected by the .com suffix. FISH! is a private, for-profit firm, with events, written material for the K-12 teachers and other organizations.

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