

SATISFACTION AND DISSATISFACTION: FORMULATING DIGITAL MARKETING STRATEGY FOR ONLINE FAITH-BASED EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

When digitally marketing an online educational program, degree or course, an institution must realize the target market which it is trying to reach. However, the demographics of the online student is extremely diverse, making marketing efforts difficult. With such a demographically diverse online student population to attract, it is important to understand what attributes make current online students satisfied or dissatisfied with the online education experience. Once these attributes are understood, organizations can effectively formulate digital marketing strategy to attract future students.

While the efforts to understand satisfaction and dissatisfaction of the online student have been numerous, these studies have mainly centered upon secular organizations. Therefore, to contribute to the literature, this study identifies which attributes make online students satisfied or dissatisfied within the faith-based online educational environment. The results of the study may help organizations and educational institutions with a faith-based mission be more effective in their digital marketing efforts to attract and enroll online students.

INTRODUCTION

Digital marketing strategy is important to all types of educational institutions/organizations. Whether the entity is large, small, non-profit or profit, primarily on ground or online, the digital marketing strategy executed must be effective to achieve any proposed promotional objectives. However, as the educational landscape continues to change with the evolution and growth of online education at many types of educational institutions, marketing programs and courses becomes increasingly difficult. Furthermore, with a diverse and growing online student market and vast competition, attracting the online student is more challenging than ever. Thus, an effective digital marketing strategy is extremely important for those institutions/organizations with online programs and courses.

One way to develop digital marketing strategy in the educational setting is to assess the current state of students and their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the institution or program in which they are enrolled. (Anderson, et. al, 2006). This assessment may help future digital marketing efforts. While satisfaction and dissatisfaction with

online learning has been studied extensively, there has been little distinction between the satisfaction/dissatisfaction factor and the type of institution in question. For example, one area of study, which has received only occasional attention in the academic literature, is online faith-based programs and courses. Therefore, it is the purpose of this study to analyze satisfaction/dissatisfaction attributes within the faith-based online learning environment to help institutions and organizations more effectively market to the diverse online student population seeking this type of online education.

RELATED LITERATURE

Marketing online programs

“What do students want?” is the main question for those who develop marketing strategy for educational entities (McGee, 2012). Though many institutions are very obvious regarding their mission and course/program in their digital marketing efforts (Van Rooij & Lemp, 2016), it is still quite difficult to determine the most effective way to

attract such a diverse online student population. Many on-line programs digitally market themselves as convenient and flexible. While this is an acceptable and widely used tactic, research has indicated that online programs should also promote other items such as quality, reputation, and individualization (Petina & Neeley, 2007). Digital marketing efforts of the organization, such as the web site and social media, are crucial components of digital strategy. For example, admissions, content, organization and ease of navigation have been shown to be important to an institution's web site (Saichaie & Morphey, 2014) along with the use of social media for competitive advantage (Cho & LoCascio, 2013). Many times, an educational institution touts traditional items such as good teaching or research, but as Chapleo, Duran and Diaz (2010) found, it may also be important to promote emotional values such as social responsibility in digital marketing efforts, as well.

Student satisfaction of online programs

The demographics of the online student ranges drastically. Many are over the age of 30, unmarried and predominantly employed full-time (Radford, 2011). Furthermore, almost one-third of the entire higher education student population has enrolled in at least one online course (Allen & Seaman, 2010). With such a diverse online student population, the attributes that affect student satisfaction or dissatisfaction within the online education experience, is crucial to understand when formulating marketing strategy to recruit and retain students.

Online students have been shown to experience higher levels of challenge, reflective thinking, practical competence, personal/social development and satisfaction with their educational experience as compared to on-ground instruction (Chen, et. al 2008). Several studies have indicated some of the attributes which determine student satisfaction within the online learning environment. These attributes include interaction, Internet self-efficacy, self-regulated learning (Kuo, et., al, 2013), instructor feedback, knowledge/ facilitation and course structure (Eom, Wen & Ashill, 2006). From a digital marketing perspective, it is important to note that perception of the institution impacts online student satisfaction. In fact, it can be one of the most important satisfaction measurements (Noel-Levitz, 2011). Even formal review rubrics have been developed to determine online student satisfaction by measuring course overview/introduction, learning objectives, assessment, course technology and learner support (Simpson, 2013). However, some measurements are not useful as satisfaction determinants such as the number of posts an online student makes (Kranszow, 2013). Similarly, Cole, Shelley and Swartz (2014) found that lack of interaction created dissatisfaction in the online learning

environment. However, communication with the instructor via video, online chats and the telephone can evoke high satisfaction rates among online learners (Joyner, et. al, 2014). Finally, faculty empathy has been shown to increase online student satisfaction (Parahoo, et. al, 2016).

Faith-based online education

There is no doubt that faith-based organizations must use marketing communications as a brand positioning tactic (Abreu, 2006) and that media richness theory impacts religious marketing (Iyer, et. al, 2014). These institutions are often early-adopters of communication technology in an effort to promote their ideas, missions and goals (Winston, 2011) and are moving online in rapid succession (Business Wire, 2009). As the online population grows, faith-based organizations and institutions are creating more online educational programs (Rogers & Howell, 2005). Therefore, many students seeking a faith-based education are examining online programs and courses to receive their education (Carnevale, 2006). While there may be many reasons a faith-based organization or institution chooses to offer online programs and courses, they must do so because of their competition who offers online learning. Some faith-based organizations concluded that they should not offer online programs until the medium was proven effective and the materials were of proven quality. However, it has been suggested that these obstacles have been solved by advances in online learning (Rogers & Howell, 2004.) Therefore, it has been suggested that when developing a brand digital marketing strategy for a faith-based educational institution, it should include not only the educational program itself, but an emphasis on the faith-based setting and how it is a part of a community (Gallagher, 2016).

Furthermore, faith-based organizations and institutions have a unique mission. They must meet the spiritual needs of the online student in a holistic manner. Not only is spirituality important in a student's life, but little research has been done to understand these spiritual needs and faith development. One study found that interactions and relationships with faculty and other students were important and that each encouraged spiritual growth (Cormeaux, 2013).

PURPOSE

Understanding what attributes make online students in the faith-based online learning environment satisfied or dissatisfied may provide digital marketers information regarding how to formulate digital marketing strategy. Examining these attributes may provide insight concerning how faith-based organizations and institutions can enrich

the online student learning experience both academically and spiritually. Therefore, the primary purpose of this descriptive, comparative study is to identify satisfaction/dissatisfaction attributes within the faith-based online learning environment to help institutions and organizations more effectively market to the diverse online student population seeking this type of online education.

METHODOLOGY

Based on the literature, the research question was posited: Which attributes of faith-based online education most prominently evoke satisfaction or dissatisfaction from participants?

In order to gather data relevant to the study, the BeADisciple organization was investigated.

Beadisciple.com (<http://www.beadisciple.com/>) is a faith-based online educational resource which houses over 100 courses taught by over 40 instructors, all of whom are laity or clergy. Online courses range in price (generally under \$100) and in length (days to weeks). A description of their mission and organizational composition is noted from their web site:

“Since 2006, BeADisciple.com has been committed to providing quality, online educational experiences with roots in Wesleyan theology. We offer online studies, workshops, and courses on a variety of ministry, formation, and leadership topics. Our goal is to make rich learning experiences accessible to church leaders and laity, no matter their location or life situation.

BeADisciple is also a community of people who are invested in becoming better Christian disciples. As courses are conducted in small groups with a trained facilitator or a certified instructor, students and instructors have an opportunity to get to know one another. Groups begin together, progress through materials, and end together.

While our background and primary perspective is United Methodist, we believe in an ecumenical mission. Students from any Mainline Protestant (Lutheran (ELCA), Presbyterian (PCUSA), Episcopal, United Church of Christ (UCC), American Baptist, Friends/Quakers, Disciples of Christ, Reformed Church in America, Metropolitan Community Churches, etc.) or Wesleyan (Nazarene, Free Methodist, African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.)) denomination ought to feel at home in most of our courses, and students from any Christian tradition will be able to learn and grow in their faith” (<http://www.beadisciple.com/about-us/>).

With permission of the organization, the researchers were given access to one year of data. Data consisted of end-of-course surveys completed and submitted online by stu-

dents within the course platform. Twenty-three courses were analyzed for the study. Using content analysis (after a 90% inter rater reliability test), the researchers analyzed open-ended “Comments/Essay” sections from each survey. This was the only consistent section that was included on every survey, since individual instructors used varied questions for their end-of-course surveys. Demographic questions were not included on the surveys. A total of 450 responses were analyzed by the researchers. To be consistent with the literature, the researchers grouped responses into three main categories: comments relating to the participants defined in this study as things important to them as individuals (coded as 1), items relating instructor (coded as 2), and matters concerning materials/course (coded as 3). In addition, it was noted if the comment was positive, negative, or neutral/could not determine.

FINDINGS

Data were collected from 23 courses with a total of 450 end-of-survey comments. Three attributes of course satisfaction were materials/course, instructor and participants. Using content analysis, two main findings were determined.

Finding #1

Of the three designated categories, the materials/course attribute was the most important in regard to factors which produce course satisfaction among students (51%), followed by the instructor (27%) and the participant (23%).

Finding #2

Within each of the three satisfaction attributes, it was found that all three had overwhelmingly positive perspectives toward the faith-based course that was analyzed.

Summary of Tone of Comment (N=45)						
Tone of comments	Materials/ Course		Instructor		Participants	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Positive	137	60	90	75	76	75
Negative	78	34	29	24	15	15
Neutral/cannot determine	13	6	1	1	9	9

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

Some inferences may be posited based on the literature and the two findings. First, by gathering, reviewing and utilizing student feedback, the digital marketer can formulate more effective strategy. For example, positive feedback in this study such as, "I greatly appreciate the depth and quantity of materials that were provided as the course progressed" (materials/course); "The instructor was always available for questions, concerns and coaching" (instructor) or, "The course was a spiritual refresher course for my skill and knowledge" (participant) are all useful for digital content creation. Other negatively-based comments such as, "I found navigating the course platform to be complex; Felt cumbersome" (materials/course); "The instructor never gave me indication that I was behind or that I needed to improve" (instructor); or "I was pretty intimidated at times" (participant), may be useful insights into what topics to avoid in digital campaigns and could be used for course improvement. Further, since materials/course are very meaningful in the faith-based program, digital marketers may want to prominently emphasize the nature of the program content in their digital marketing strategy and should formulate materials which appeal to this construct. The fact that materials/course (depth and quantity of materials, assignments, resources, text, discussions, and pace of course,) was the most important attribute for determining satisfaction in this study, could be very useful information and utilized by digital marketing professionals in the faith-based genre and become essential promotional aspects of the digital marketing campaign.

Secondly, digital marketers in the faith-based environment should consider a slightly non-traditional perspective of data. Traditionally, consumers have been defined mainly by demographics such as age, gender or income. However, it has been noted that online consumers do not define themselves by their demographics but by their interests, behaviors and beliefs (Kuhn, 2011). This includes the faith-based community who may be deeply connected with others by their beliefs. While the researchers were initially concerned with the lack of demographic data, the absence of this data actually caused the researchers to look more closely at the affective nature of the data. This type of education is respected by the student for the intrinsic and spiritual values it may present. Specifically, the materials/course became vitally important to the student and were even more important than individual concerns or the instructor who was presenting it. Therefore, digital marketing professionals should develop strategy based on affective traits more so than the demographics of the online consumers themselves.

As competition increases in the online environment for educational organizations and institutions, the digital marketing of these entities becomes increasingly important to attract, recruit and maintain the student population. While the popularity of online education becomes even more prevalent among all types of organizations, including faith-based, determining what makes online students satisfied or dissatisfied with their experience becomes imperative to future digital marketing strategy. However, the faith-based organizations and institutions may benefit to not only look at what their students find important in a course, but they may also want to look beyond traditional metrics, like demographics, to understand more about the person behind the number.

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