TRAINING, MARKET AND BUSINESS IN THE SOCIAL WEB

By

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ABSTRACT

The development and implementation of web 2.0 or social web are threatening the basis of the ways of mixing with other people. These changes are affecting everybody and, in particular, companies and institutions related to people's education, teaching and training for their inclusion in society and labour market.

This article brings up some reflections in two ways: the first one deals with some reasons why education is also related to the concept of company and the second one deals with how these changes generated by web 2.0 are affecting some training companies, represented in this case by Master-D.

Keywords: Social web, Web 2.0, Blogs, Wikis, Training, Teaching, Companies, Market, Business.

INTRODUCTION

In the present a certain Puritanism (or even hypocrisy) often prevents us from uttering the words training and education together with dirty money, business, market, money, client…Let's not create a polemic, however many have done business by negotiating.

At this point we should be aware that nothing is free, everything comes at a price, but a different matter altogether is who pays that price. It may be that one does not have to pay for something (nothing at all or a perhaps a small part) but that something almost always comes at a cost to someone (Fandos, 2004).

From this perspective, and put simply, what's wrong with considering the student or the pupil (also the teachers and other staff) for what they really are; clients (both internal and external)?

Real businesses are built on the win-win principle. Both (company and client / client and company) sides win. We work together to achieve our goal. Real companies go to such great lengths to realise this vision that it is essential that their objectives are closely linked to their client's.

The authors are now with Bartolomé (2004) where he considers learning to be an individual activity of the pupil, and that teachers can not do anymore than guide, accompany and facilitate…whatever we agree, yet learning is the responsibility of the learner and as such he must do it.

So given that learning is something that the learner does whenever he wishes or whenever he can, we as training companies have had to look for formulae to offer this accompanying service, tutoring services or orientation in the most flexible way possible; in business we are certain that we have to go or be exactly where the client may need you; however would not any teaching institution defend this idea of being with the student (client) together with a goal –wished– reached thanks to a common effort?

If we can accept this premise then training and business can be clearly linked. Let us consider something which is obvious: business is linked to competitiveness, therefore, by deduction, there is a certain element of competitiveness that training must bear in mind (Aguaded & Fandos, 2008b).

Let us continue with this series of syllogisms. It seems to be that this business spirit in the teaching field must be based on the principle of win-win in a competitive way and in the broadest sense of the word (Deming 1989).

There are many ways to procure this element of competitiveness, one of them is to look for the difference, distinguish yourself from what the others do and how they do it, in order to open up a market, to offer a different service, and therefore to have more chances of success.

Social web and Companies

Concentrating on the client (pupil) to create a good

relationship which is efficient and effective which delivers a profit in the user and provides what each individual pupil really needs are aspects which differentiate us and this type of elements can be perfectly co-ordinated with the e-learning, the 'blended learning' or with 'open training' (methods that, being more or less developed, are applied by many training companies) and are intrinsic to the potential of web 2.0.

This situation, these possibilities for diversification, personalization, and differentiation of the various services which individual clients demand is the aura which surrounds the work of this company.

Because it is useful, because it allows us to tailor to the needs of each and every client, because it generates principles like those of 'win-win', because economy plus technology is viable and because it is flexible; these are just a few of our most outstanding characteristics. The possibilities of the social web interrelated to 'blended learning' and 'Open learning' are becoming an essential part of this training company (Aguaded & Fandos, 2008) because apart from all those things already mentioned, it allows, strengthens and facilitates business opportunities.

The authors know that the incorporation of web 2.0 in the life of companies does not have repercussions in their relationships with external clients (students in the case of training companies). The social web is changing the way labour relations in companies (with forums, wikis, platforms…, in the different intranets). The relation of companies and their potential clients is also changing in their way of standing out in this 'infoxication' (confusion caused by an excess of disorganized information) (Mcluhan, 1969) confusion coming from the Internet and our society (new ways of marketing, such as viral marketing. And if that was not enough, web 2.0 is generating new types of relations: 'networking' social networks that, on many occasions, affect workers and managers in parity conditions in any kind of environment.

We are facing a reality that is affecting many business models that necessarily will adapt in the following years so that they can guarantee their survival.

These changes must be in line with some quality standards that we demand more and more as clients. The problem of quality still has a long way to go (Aguaded y Fandos, 2008b).

Training companies and the social web. Experience of some obstacles

At the same time as society was changing its organisation, didactic organisation in education began to be questioned (Aiello, 2004), currently the debate is not about virtual versus on-site, the general trend (Harvey, 1996) is to shift the focus from the teacher onto the learner, a focus which Master-D has had clear from its creation.

This is something which training companies have always understood: The most important thing is the person who is learning and their needs and that attention must be paid to them first and foremost, not on the contents of what he/she must learn nor on the channel through which this information arrives.

The authors principle is to offer solutions, not to pontificate about which is the best product or which has the best contents.

Since its outset the mission of this company has been to help the greatest number of pupils reach their goals in the shortest time using an appropriate product and excellent service.

If you pay attention to 'the correct product' and 'excellent service' it is very clear where the focus lies. As the authors stated above learning is an individual and personal thing, the task of the training companies is not to influence learning, in fact they cannot do that. Its objective is to influence the accompaniment, the assessments, as far as providing resources, is concerned (both material and immaterial) which allows every single pupil to interiorise and learn whatever they need to.

The model however is based on each person what he/she needs when they need it. Tutorials, certainly, but not at a pre-arranged time set at the beginning of the course (provided that this time coincides with the teaching staff's timetable). The client calls the shots.

In different approach, the authors are also convinced that the client does not have 'carte blanche' to do whatever he likes simply because he is the client. The authors

propose an itinerary for him to achieve his objective, from the beginning it is clear that as he progresses with his studies and reaches milestones, the client/pupil gains access to new services, support and materials.

However, the work and the process of learning is up to the individual, but periodically, the pupil has to demonstrate that he is completing his part of the work and to ascertain that he/she has to pass through certain points.The introduction of these 'check points' transformed a company of distance learning into a company of 'open training and coaching'.

In order to offer this excellent service which forms an essential part of the company's mission, they decided to implement an investment plan which has allowed us to create 50 delegations/branches throughout Spain with teaching, information systems and communications departments which make up more than three quarters of the total workforce. As they can see this is far removed from the notion that 'blended learning' or 'e-learning' is popular in training companies because they can keep the costs down.

So to stay with this subject, in order to offer a service and provide the appropriate work which personal learning requires, this company has made important investment efforts in technology.

The web 2.0 has a lot of possibilities which the market is gradually accepting and which training companies are incorporating. However this presents companies with other problems: What contents? Who creates the material? How should I organize it? How can I distribute these in accordance with the client's profile and needs?

These are just some of the questions which training companies must answer in order to be different and competitive as said before.

It may be that whoever is reading these thoughts finds some incongruity with what they were discussing earlier if the learner is collaborative one may think that the question they asked above 'What contents?' should not apply. The contents can be developed by the networking a working group which supports the web 2.0 and there is no incongruity because training companies know that the

client and the network of pupils, effectively can create conditions and collaborative learning, but the client who pays because he has the necessity he pays principally because he wants to be offered a solution and of course that solution cannot be that he resolves the problem himself, and if this were so why would he want the mediation of a company?

However, the problem is clear.

The environment surrounding web 2.0 is very interesting. However the authors must continue working on the creation of contents which develop all the potential of this setting.

One of the most relevant potentials of the web 2.0, as commented before is the collaborative work which it allows. On the other hand, knowledge, being a technical expert…, are elements or differentiating factors which some people do better than others, for example, a job interview, an official exam, a public exam… Some training companies find themselves in a dilemma, on the one hand learning can be better and make a more significant difference when it is done collaboratively, and on the other hand showing all you know and sharing your expertise can be counterproductive when possibly both have the same aspirations and consequently, they are adversaries which struggle to get the same place, the same job How can the company reconcile the necessities of both clients?

Some Social Web Facilities for Training Companies

But which technologies and what for? All of them. The ones that exist and the ones that will, because for teaching companies, technologies are just a way to get to give an excellent service. Furthermore, technologies are seen as an unavoidable element to become visible. They are the first step to get to give the service required by our students (clients).

Then, it is obvious that these days companies have to adapt to the changes we are living, in this case, those coming from Web 2.0. In the end, it is probably an approximation to what Andrew McAfee called Enterprise 2.0 or what Julen Iturbe Ormaetxe called Empresas 2.0.

In the end, it talks about taking advantage of the

possibilities given by technologies being conscious that the way of acting can end up proposing (in fact, it does) other models to generate a change in the organization's system of values.

Every company knows that its survival depends on its adaptation to modern times and the necessities of its clients. This company Darwinism obliges us to think about which are the necessary adaptations to warrant survival of companies. Master-D is not an exception in this sense. It has to be in the vanguard of these adaptations as a result of its own mission as a company: help as many students as possible to get their goals in the shortest time possible through an excellent product and service.

As they put in advance, digitalization and networks are the origin of a great number of changes in the tools and methods of communication. The methods of communication between company and (internal and external) client are adapting to this situation.

The new tools allow us to address and respond to the client in a more personalised way. This situation prompts the emphasis on the contents and the information rather than the tool we use to get to our client. Information is not conditioned by periodicity of the media anymore. Nowadays, updating can be permanent, in real time.

Nowadays, companies are more and more conscious about the fact that information spread, brand and attraction of customer models are overcoming the «point-multipoint» paradigm (which is unidirectional). (Figure 1)

Bit by bit the 'multipoint–multipoint' model is being imposed and furthermore is multidirectional (Figure 2). It is the user that accesses the servers where the information that they search for or want is. Furthermore it is this user that generates what some people call viral marketing.

In this model, each transmitter becomes a receiver and each receiver becomes a transmitter and the messages can reach everyone, either segmented or individually. model which the theorist Jean Cloutier proposed (Cloutier, 1975).

The model 'multipoint – multipoint' allows all possible combinations. It is the expression of the EME – REC (Emetteur–Recepteur) model which the theorist Jean
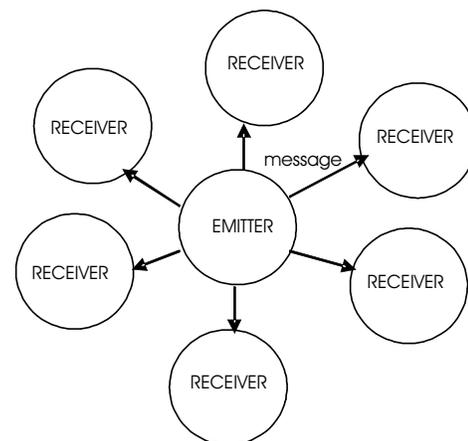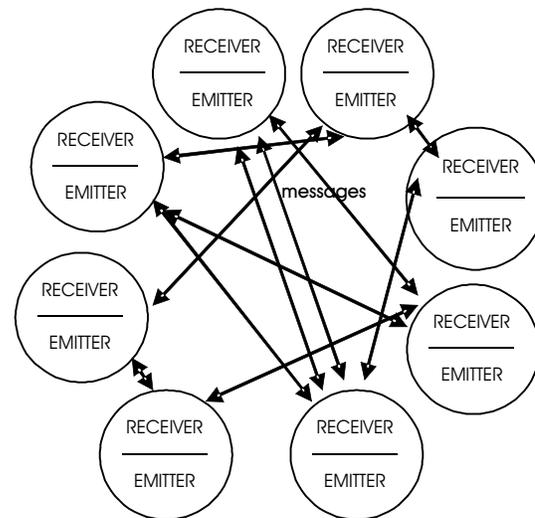

Figure 1. Model (Point – Multipoint)

Figure 2. Model (Multipoint - Multipoint)

Cloutier proposed (Cloutier, 1975).

Not only it is to do with acquiring clients, but also gaining their loyalty. The actions in this sense achieve, in the first instance, two important objectives: brand creation and improving brand recognition. The simple fact is that in talking about something or offering something to potential customers, obliges companies to be constantly up to date with this knowledge.

Suffice to say, therefore, that in this context the user/client is 'king'. In the present moment companies have to be aware that the means of client acquirement have to follow a 'user centred' model (Aguaded, I. y Fandos, M., 2008) which aims not only to obtain feedback but also, where possible, interactivity.

To summarize, the interest aroused by the social Web in

the company world is growing day by day. There are basically two reasons: it allows proximity between (real or potential) client and company. It is a clear relational marketing tool. It permits the creation of a network of mutual knowledge (in both directions) allowing the appearance of mutual trust.

The experience of a training company with blogs

On the one hand, in the last two years, the Spanish training company Master-D has been betting on the use of blogs as a tool that brings a 'visibility' of the products, services and brand image of the company and it also generates traffic (visits) to their corporate website. This leads more people to be interested in their products and/or services.

The company has also created different blogs, that are fed by professionals and managers of the company, which are allowing two types of objectives: brand knowledge and client generation.

The experience is still very recent, but in the first stage of their analysis the authors observed that a correlation between the number of visits to our blogs (www.masterdopina.es; http://blog.opositor.com; http://blogmasterd.pt; http://blogmasterd.gr; www.masterdlabsbs.es; www.blogenergia srenovables.com; …) and the traffic generated in our corporate web (www.masterd.es) exists. The authors have also proved that a percentage of that traffic that gets to our corporate website ends up asking for information and a percentage of these end up becoming clients of the company. The presence of blogs is firstly helping us to get more clients and, therefore, a greater business opportunity.

The authors are conscious of the important potentialities for companies that blogs have (Villanueva, J.; Aced, C.; y Armelini, G., 2007) In this case and for now, they are only stressing the external dimension of them.

The first conclusions of this experience are:

Revision of the use and possibilities of the ICT (Information and Communication Technologies), which facilitate the necessary visibility for this time of 'infoxication'.

For this, the authors have to take into account a work paradigm in which 'being participant' substitutes 'being looked at' and the directives of the companies have to be present (make themselves visible) on the Net to give answers to those who ask questions, to generate trust on the brand, the product and the service offered by their companies. In the end, the important thing is to come to the top/to emerge from obscurity, generate credibility, have the ability to 'manage' the conversation and get some compromises.

With care, but being sure that this way of working is bringing us satisfactory results, we can say that corporate blogs provide competitive advantages that can be checked in the companies using them.

It is evident that blogs are a potent corporate communication tool that facilitates interactivity with a public that can potentially become clients of the company promoted by the blog. Without a shadow of a doubt the first result is that it improves the positioning of the corporate web page in search engines.

Obviously, the traffic that supports the different weblogs relies on the 'posts' and 'tags' used on them. In any case, it is a tool that has to be clearly aligned with the strategic and communication plan of the company. It has to be perfectly in tune with the corporate culture.

It also provides the company with an important source of information about the opinion of the users (potential clients) and even the works or development lines of other companies in the same field or competitors.

Therefore, suffice to say that this option (and the corresponding risks) brings with it 'visibility' of the company, as they said, for the best positioning in internet search engines. Firstly, it builds community 'networking' between other blogs (and their corresponding bloggers), and even for the directives that feed the thematic blogs to be able to be considered an authority and reference in this area of knowledge. It allows for an immediate feedback and compels you to update (and create through diffusion) specific knowledge. This allows companies to 'encourage talent' of their employees.

From a 'stricto sensu' publicity standpoint, the company becomes its own billboard through its blogs. This, taken to the extreme, could even make it a trend setter.

In any case, we also have to say that if the company is not

transparent and if it is not absolutely ready to give all the information required and even accept reasoned and reasonable criticisms, the social Web and blogs cannot be their tools. In the end, it is a question of being as much authentic as possible.

Conclusion: Adapting for Survival

As if it was a newspaper headline, this could be the most important conclusion that companies (training companies too) have to work hard at it so that they can guarantee their survival now and forever.

We are immersed in some changes, many times vertiginous, originated by the progress and implementation of ICT in any field of social development. We are subjugated to what some people call «information pedagogy». This current says that teacher and students are a kind of mediator between information and human experience. This mediation is many times conditioned by technology and the use of a whole range of tools and possibilities that social web or web 2.0 offers.

These changes are creating new relation environments and new ways of communication. If the consumption of companies' products or services is essential for their survival, and it is necessary they are known so that this happens, the adaptation to this changes is an immediate challenge to companies that aspire to continue in the coming years.

The social web is nowadays and is going to be in the nearest future a Copernican change in social and educative environments. The adaptation to these changes postulates as a priority for everybody.

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