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.

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.

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 online 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 (Szaicha & Morpew, 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 Díaz (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 range drastically. Many are over the age of 30, unmarried and predominately employed full-time (Radford, 2011). With such a diverse online student population it is important that 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. 2009). Several studies have indicated the student supports that affect student satisfaction, or dissatisfaction within the online education experience, are consistent with the literature, the researchers grouped responses into three main categories: comments relating to the faith-based course that was analyzed. Two main findings were discovered from any Mainline Protestant (Lutheran (ELCA), Presbyterian (PCUSA), Episcopal, United Church of Christ (UCC), American Baptist, 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 students within the course platform. Twenty-three courses were analyzed for the study. Using content analysis (after a 98% 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 in the survey. A total of 458 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 to 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 458 end-of-course 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 participation (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.
Satisfaction and Dissatisfaction: Formulating Marketing Strategy for Online Faith-Based Education

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 from not only looking at what their students find important in a course, but also may want to look beyond traditional metrics, like demographics, to understand more about the person behind the number.

REFERENCES


Kranzow, J. (2013). Faculty leadership in online education: Structuring courses to impact student satisfaction and persistence. Merlot Journal of Online Learning and Teaching 9, 1, 131-139.


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