

E-mail Customer Service by Australian Educational Institutions

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Abstract

This research used an e-mail from mock Chinese consumers to investigate how Australian educational institutions use e-mail for overseas marketing and customer service. Less than two out of three of the 212 institutions sampled replied to a simple e-mail asking about fees and entry requirements. Even less institutions answered the questions promptly, politely, personally, professionally and promotionally. Despite e-mail's widespread use, these results highlight implementation issues with this new marketing and customer service tool.

The study gives institutions benchmarks and insights for improving e-mail marketing and online customer service. Academically, this paper supports past organisational research that size and industry sector relate to adopting innovations, suggests new metrics for measuring Internet adoption and proposes future research agendas.

Keywords: Electronic marketing, diffusion of innovations, e-mail, eService, education

1. Introduction

Australian educational institutions, from high schools to higher education, have adopted the Internet. Yet how effectively they use this new tool remains to be seen. Over-hyped technologies, poor implementation and unintended consequences can offset fabled technology benefits or backfire (Brown and Duguid, 2000; Fidler, 1997; Tenner, 1996) as in Boo.com (Stockport, Kunnath and Sedick, 2001) and similar dot.com disasters (Mahajan, Srinivasan and Wind, 2002). For companies today though, it is no longer a question of going online, rather how to leverage their online presence and measure its profitability (Dubosson-Torbay, Osterwalder and Pigneur, 2002; Garbi, 2002; Porter, 2001). Similarly, academics wrestle with the role of an organisation's online presence (Barnes and Cumby, 2002; Weil and Vitale, 2001) and appropriate metrics to evaluate electronic service strategies (Cox and Dale, 2001; Rust and Lemon, 2001).

Organisations often fear being left behind, jump on the bandwagon and adopt the latest technology -- such as the Internet (McBride, 1997; Murphy, Olaru, Schegg and Frey, 2003). Sensing and responding to technology is

critical for success (Day and Schoemaker, 2000) and information-intensive industries, such as education, are inviting candidates for Internet transformation (Raymond, 2001). As universities, textbook publishers and private ventures explore online initiatives (Murphy and Massey, 2000; Massey and Murphy, 2000), the Internet becomes increasingly important for educational institutions (Tsichritzis, 1999).

To remain competitive, universities view students as customers and are restructuring themselves as service providers (Tsichritzis, 1999). Australia's introduction of full-fees in 1986 replaced student subsidies, established an open market for public and private education providers and gave birth to Australia's education export industry (Strickland, 1995). With 153,372 international students and a further 34,905 enrolled offshore with Australian education providers, overseas students generated \$3.7 billion for Australia's economy in 2000 (DETYA 2001).

Four common international educational sectors in Australia are University, ELICOS (English Language Intensive Course for Overseas Students), VET (Vocational Education and Training) and Schools

(primary and secondary). The VET sector, which includes all public and private vocational colleges, offers Australian Qualifications Framework courses and pathways to university studies. In the university sector, postgraduate education is deregulated and an important revenue source for most Australian universities. As faculties may offer unlimited places to full-fee paying students, competition for full-fee paying postgraduate students is intense and prestigious institutions have a competitive advantage (Scott, 1999).

China, Australia's fastest growing overseas market with a 69% increase and 14,948 students in 2000, was forecast to become Australia's biggest market in 2002 (DETYA 2001). Chinese demand for overseas education will continue to grow due to rapid economic and social developments, the 2008 Olympic Games, World Trade Organisation membership, governmental support for international cooperation in education and affluent parents willing to pay high fees for their single child's education (Xinhua 1999; Mazzarol, Soutar, Smart and Choo 2001). Most institutions consider China a great opportunity and are developing this market through agents, trade shows, joint ventures, and offshore programs (Mazzarol et al. 2001).

For Chinese (Mazzarol et al., 2001) as well as other students choosing overseas education, information is the most critical variable (Bourke, 2000). Potential overseas students going online found insufficient information on Australian universities' websites, yet website information influenced their choices (Gomes and Murphy, 2003). Websites are the glamorous Internet application, but institutions may be overlooking a simpler and more powerful online tool, e-mail.

One out of three prospective overseas students used e-mail to seek information about Australian educational institutions, and responses to their e-mail queries influenced four of five students' choices. Yet some institutions lacked policies or procedures for answering e-mail (Gomes and Murphy 2003). When prospective students or their parents e-mail an institution -- knock on their virtual door -- how does the institution respond?

Treating e-mail as business correspondence, similar to letters and faxes, necessitates developing standards for prompt, polite, personal, professional and promotional e-mail responses (Murphy et al, 2003; Ober, 2001; Strauss and Hill, 2001; Yang, 2001; Zemke and Connellan, 2001). Diffusion of innovations (Rogers, 1995), which helps explain how organisations implement new technologies,

serves as the theoretical base for benchmarking and investigating e-mail customer service by Australian educational institutions that target overseas students.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Diffusion of innovations

For over half a century scholars have researched how consumers and organisations adopt new products and technologies, from different perspectives including sociology, geography and consumer behaviour (e.g., Brown, 1981; Mahajan, Muller and Bass, 1990; Rogers, 1995). Society often misuses and overestimates the short run influence of emerging technologies and underestimates their long run effects (Brown and Duguid, 2000; Fidler, 1997; Rogers, 1995; Tenner, 1996). The media, for example, hyped paperless offices as inevitable thanks to computers. Today's paperless office is an office with more paper (Forester, 1992; Liu and Stork, 2000; Tenner, 1996).

Prior media innovations such as the telephone and radio have had widespread impact on both business and everyday life but fail to match the combined speed and scale of the Internet's impact (Barwise and Hammond, 1998). With 10.63 million citizens online, over half the Australian population has adopted the Internet. By contrast, Australia's fastest growing overseas student market, China -- with 45.8 million or just one in 30 citizens online (Nua Internet Survey, 2002) -- is early in the adoption process. Once online, at home and at work (Ramsey, 2001), users of all ages flock to e-mail (BBC News 2002, Pastore 2002). As China's number of Internet users grew 72.8% from June 2001 to June 2002 (Nua Internet Survey, 2002), Australian educational institutions can expect increased e-mail from prospective Chinese students and their parents.

2.2 Diffusion of innovations by organisations

Individual diffusion occurs in several ways, based on social structures, social norms, opinion leaders, change agents and types of innovations. Rogers (1995) and others (e.g., Abrahamson, 1991; Damanpour, 1991; Fichman, 2000) have extended this model to organisations, noting that individuals often make optional innovation decisions, but organisations decide authoritatively or collectively. Factors such as individual (leader) characteristics and internal/external structure influence organisational innovativeness (Rogers, 1995).

Structural considerations related to adoption include organisational characteristics such as affiliation, age,

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