



Relationship marketing on the Internet: the case of top- and lower-ranked US universities and colleges

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Abstract

This study uses Kotler's "five-level model" of relationship marketing (P. Kotler and G. Armstrong, *Principles of Marketing*, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1996) to assess the web sites of top- and lower-ranked US universities and colleges. The data suggest that few web sites of both top- and lower-ranked institutions have yet attained the highest level ("partnership") of relationship marketing. However, the results also suggest that the web sites of top-ranked schools vs. lower-ranked institutions are better suited to build relationships with students. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Many believe that when it comes to marketing, the Internet is the "great equalizer," permitting service-based organizations, no matter how successful or well known, the ability to promote their products and services in a more-or-less equal manner. The thinking goes like this: since web-based marketing is relatively inexpensive and widely available, all organizations enjoy similar abilities to use the Internet to their marketing advantage. In reality, however, interactive technology has not "leveled the playing field" when it comes to the marketing of US universities and colleges. In this study, we understand why top-ranked schools enjoy an "interactive edge" when it comes to promoting their services to and building relationships with students.

2. Literature review

Universities and colleges in the United States have increasingly developed their web sites to provide marketing information to students, alumni, and other shareholders. The change from passive information-based bulletin boards to interactive "cyber ads" is in keeping with the promotion of institutions of higher learning in the US, which has developed from a marketing concept philosophy that is highly responsive to consumer demand (Wasmer and Bruner, 1999;

Rottmeyer and Linamen, 1999). Relationship marketing (Dwyer et al., 1987), which states that the purpose of businesses is to create and keep customers, is rooted in the marketing philosophy.

As a marketing tool, the web is unsurpassed offering a relatively inexpensive means of stimulating demand for information about a school's products and services and creating lifelong relationships with students and alumni (Kittle and Ciba, 1999). Today's web sites provide students with the ability to apply for entrance online, offer virtual campus tours, and make available syllabi and assignments online. For students and alumni, university and college web sites may offer information on the news and weather, as well as up-to-date stock quotes, e-mail accounts, and university chat rooms (Liebowitz, 1999).

The publication of a number of academic studies underscores the importance of the Internet for the marketing of higher education in the US. Three categories of studies have emerged: (1) identifying what students want from a web sites, (2) practical applications for how a university or college web sites may be used to increase enrollment, and (3) assessment of existing university and college web sites. Several studies in each category are briefly explained below.

Consumer wants: What it is that students want and need from a university or college web sites? Anderson and Reid (1999) found that the most important web sites items for students included information on costs, admission requirements, available majors, and ways to

contact enrollment offices. Using a clustering technique, McKnight and Paugh's (1999) study went beyond purely informational content to identify six visual and verbal information categories that were important to students. These included: campus landscape, campus architecture, school programs, tuition costs, outstanding school features, and prestigious accomplishments credited to the school.

Practical applications: What marketing goals can schools accomplish using their web sites? Taking a pragmatic approach, researchers have offered suggestions for how schools may use their web-based technology to gather survey information on current students (Howes and Mailloux, 1999); establish systems of electronic applications processing (Queijo and Torgensen, 1999); and recruit international students (Almeida and Dwight, 1999).

Assessment: How well do universities and colleges use their web sites to meet students demand for information? Two studies by Kittle and Ciba (1997, 1998) concluded that since 1997, web sites have made it easier for students to apply for enrollment, obtain information about faculty, and virtually tour university and college campuses. Their optimistic appraisal is clouded, however, by Klassen and Sitzman (in press) who concluded that while some universities and colleges have built potentially useful web sites, many are failing to use them effectively to meet consumer requests and respond to consumer complaints. Further, they found a disparity between top- and lower-ranked schools, concluding that "top-ranked schools enjoy more interactive capabilities and are doing a better job at using this technology to respond to consumer (demand)".

3. The present study

The present study falls into the third category ("Assessment") of research on web-based marketing of higher education in the US. Like Kittle and Ciba (1999), it uses Kotler's "five-level model" of relationship marketing to assess how well suited are universities and colleges to build relationships with students through their web sites. Expanding on the work of Kibble and Ciba, this study examines whether or not differences

exist between the web sites of top- and lower-ranked schools, á la Klassen and Sitzman (in press).

4. Methodology

4.1. Kotler's five-level model of relationship marketing

Kotler has identified five levels of transaction relationships depending on how a company responds to a customer after he/she has purchased a product. The company that does not follow-up at all after the sale is operating at the *Basic* level. When a company encourages a customer to call with questions, but the company, itself, does not initiate any contact with the customer, it is operating at the *Reactive* level. A single call to the customer after he/she makes a purchase indicates that the company is operating at the *Accountable* level. Companies that periodically contact a customer are operating at the *Proactive* level, and companies that continually contact a customer once he/she has purchased are at the *Partnership* level.

4.2. Web-based strategies for relationship-building

The model of analysis used in the present study, adopted from Kittle and Ciba (1998), assesses three information areas offered by university and college web sites: applications, faculty, and tours. Table 1 describes each area according to the Kotler's five relationship levels, and each category is described below:

Applications: Relationship-building begins at the home page as students are welcomed to the site and encouraged to apply for enrollment. The web sites that were judged in this study to be at the Basic level offered no means for students to apply to their school, and at the Reactive level only E-mail admissions were available. Students were able to request an application online if the web site was at the Accountable level, and at the Proactive level students were able to complete an application online or download an application. Web sites that achieved the highest level, Partnership, were those that gave students the opportunity to check the status of their application online.

Table 1
Website components by five levels of relationship

Applications	Faculty	Campus Tours
B	None	None
R	Faculty Vita	Map w. Building Names
A	E-mail Admissions	Map w. Bldg. Description
P	Req. App. Online	Series of Photo Courses Taught
P	Complete Online Images	Map w. Photo Assignments
P	Check Status of Images	
	Fac. Photo Images	
	Fac. List w. or Download App.	
	Online Syllabi/ App. Online	

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